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Cowboy Chris, the Vengeance Volunteer.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN.



THE DEATH HUNT PARDS WERE BOTH AMUSED AND ASTONISHED.

Cowboy Chris, THE VENGEANCE VOLUNTEER; OR, THE DEATH HUNT PARDS.

A Romance of Arizona.

BY WM. WEST WILDER,
("WYOMING WILL")

AUTHOR OF THE "COWBOY CHRIS" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN OF NERVE.

"You cannot mean it, Mr. Pike! It can't be you believe these lying tales about me! You will not stand between Bessie and I!"

"But I do mean it, fer I loves my leetle gal. Lyin' tales, eh? Wal, ef they be lies, they're ther fu'st I ever saw dressed in ther clothes of truth. No, no, young feller! I am not fooled. I hev heard ther *proof*! You hev confessed with yer own lips yer past life has bin wild an' reckless—ye tole my child that."

"I do not deny it; but never in all my past life has there been anything criminal. You do not believe me; I read the doubt in your face! But, it is true! I know from whose lips you have heard these stories against me. Pascal Boone has a smooth tongue and convincing way, but he is black—black to the core! He hates me for the past, as he fancies I did him an injury in our boyhood days when we were schoolmates together. That is why he has told these base lies about me."

"It may be ye speaks ther truth, Conrad; but Boone brought ther proof that ye wuz White Plume, lieutenant ter Red Fox, whose dastardly band of road raiders an' cattle-thieves is known all over Arizona. I might hev denounced ye ter ther sheriff of Glory Gulch, an' hed ye 'rested, but I chose ter guv yer fair warnin' an' plenty of time ter git. I hev done so."

The first speaker was a young man of prepossessing appearance and earnest manners. His face and hands were tanned by exposure to all kinds of weather, and he had the hardy, rugged appearance of one used to outdoor life among the mountains and on the plains. There was nothing treacherous about his face; his eyes were frank and steady, his bearing was fearless and manly; in fact, he was the last person one would take to be a villain.

His dress was of plain woolen material, but it seemed to fit his fine form in a manner that showed his splendid build to advantage. On his head he wore a broad-brimmed sombrero. There were no weapons visible about his person.

This was Conrad Vincent.

Confronting the young man in the open cabin doorway was an old miner, whose eyes were sharp and piercing, and whose words and manner showed he detested anything rascally. He was small and round-shouldered, having a nose like the beak of a hawk, the lower portion of his face being covered by a thin gray beard. He was dressed in the rough woolen garments familiar to the mining regions, and a belt around his waist held a brace of handsome revolvers and a knife.

Far and wide Old Jim Pike was known as a persistent prospector and a man of hard luck. Fortune had not smiled on him, and his life journey had been rough and thorny.

Jim Pike had a girl, a beautiful daughter whom he loved with all his rough heart. Conrad Vincent for a short time had been paying attentions to Bessie Pike, and it was plain she looked on the young man with favor. Although Bessie was young—almost too young to think of marriage—her father had put no obstacle in the path of the lovers until Pascal Boone, Conrad's former schoolmate and enemy, had filled Old Jim's ears with his delusive tales, and laid before him what seemed to be positive proof of their truth.

Then Old Jim stepped between his child and a man whom he firmly believed unworthy of her.

"Yes, I hev done so," the old prospector repeated, after a moment of silence, during which Conrad was eying him closely, evidently at a loss for words to express his feelings. "Now ther best thing you kin do is ter git. Ef Kilmore, ther sheriff, lays han's on ye, you'll be in er bad box."

"And do you mean to say you would make a charge against me to Kilmore?" demanded the young man, his eyes flashing.

"I'll do anything ter protect my child."

Conrad made a half-scornful gesture.

"To protect your child!" he repeated. "Why do you talk like that? You know I would give up my life in her defense!"

"Thet soun's well, but it is all talk, I reckon."

"You ought to know I mean it, for have I not fought for her already? have I not taken desperate chances to save her from her enemies?"

"You say so, but I reckon ther chances yer took wuz ter save yer own neck as much as hern. Like her, you wuz er prisoner in ther han's of ther Utes. You escaped with her; thet is all."

"All! Is it all? Well, never mind; for I see it is useless to reason with you. You have been blinded and fooled by Pascal Boone, but he shall answer for his lies! I will meet him man to man, and then he shall swallow them—or die!"

Old Jim snapped his fingers.

"You will hev tergit someone else ter try yer mock theater tork on ef ye wants ter make an affect," he asserted. "Ther stuff don't go down with me."

The young man's face flushed hotly, and he was about to make reply when a distant burst of merry laughter came to his ears.

Old Jim started with an exclamation of dismay.

"Thet's Bessie!" he cried. "She's comin' back sooner then I expected she w'd. She must not see you byer, so git out of this!"

But, Conrad did not stir.

"No," was his firm retort. "I will not go until I have seen her and learned if she believes these vile lies about me! Her lips have confessed her love for me, and I will know if that love has been killed at a stroke! Do not try to prevent me, old man, for I am in no mood to be trifled with now. I know she is your child, but I have a claim on her until she tells me she no longer loves me!"

Confusion was written on the old miner's face.

"But ye must go!" he hissed, springing forward and catching Conrad by the arm. "She must not see ye now!"

"And why not now?"

"She—she don't know; I hain't tole her 'bout."

With a single movement, the lover flung Old Jim's hand from his arm, scorn written on his face, while he spoke in a low and even tone that told how much he was holding himself in check:

"So, that is why you want me to go! You have not told her! You wanted me to go away and never see her any more, then it would surely appear I was what you claim—it would appear I had deserted her like a miserable rascal! Jim Pike, I would not have believed you capable of such a thing!"

"It wuz all—fer—fer Bessie's sake, an'—"

"That is enough! She shall not believe me a sneak if I can help it! Right here I will remain till she comes. She shall hear my denial of these lies about me, and then—and then—"

"An' then ef she believes 'em—w'at then?"

"She will not believe them!"

"Wal, it makes no difference a tall ef she don't. I believe them, an' she is my child. I shell protect her."

"I cannot understand how that fellow succeeded in gaining such an influence over you! You are not like the Jim Pike of yesterday! But, Bessie will not be changed, and she shall become mine!"

Those words seemed to arouse Old Jim to a furious outburst.

"So ye mean ter hev her anyway!" he cried. "Wal, ye never shell! She is under age, an' still in my care. I will look out fer her. You shell not stay ter deceive her! *Git or die!*"

With a sudden movement, he snatched out a revolver and thrust the muzzle almost against Conrad Vincent's forehead.

"Git!" he repeated. "Ef ye don't, I'll shoot ye whar ye stan'!"

Calmly the young man looked along the gleaming barrel till his eyes met the flashing orbs of the enraged parent; then, without a tremor in his voice, he said:

"Shoot, old man—shoot, if you will! Living or dead, I remain here till Bessie comes!"

CHAPTER II.

THE COWBOY'S OATH.

If Conrad Vincent was in truth a villain, he was no coward, for not one man in a hundred could have gazed so calmly into the muzzle of

that loaded and leveled weapon—not one man in a hundred could have spoken without a tremor in his voice when threatened with instant death.

For a moment it seemed as if Old Jim would pull the trigger and stretch the defiant young man at his feet; but his better judgment prevailed, and he restrained the mad impulse to kill.

"You fool!" he grated. "It is a wonder I do not keep mer word an' salt ye! It's only fer Bessie's sake I spares ye, fer I don't want her ter see ye layin' dead."

"Then I owe you no thanks, old man, and I will remember that. I have no desire to be indebted to you in any way. Were you not her father—"

"W'at then?"

"Well, never mind. She is coming! Put up your weapon, if you have conquered your mad desire to shoot me."

Old Jim obeyed.

"Stay, ef ye will!" he said. "It won't do ye any good."

At this moment the two heard another burst of laughter that came from the pines back of the cabin, and a merry, girlish voice cried:

"It's no use, Hans; you can't run as fast as a turtle! I have laughed myself sore seeing you waddle! Oh, dear me! I'll give you these flowers if you catch me before the front of the cabin is reached, and I will run backward."

"By shimminy crashus! I pets you I do dot or preaks mein pack der whole length uf mein spinal columns! Wool! Look away oudt vor me, vor I vas coomin' like some sdeam railroad! Yaw, dot vas so!"

Then there was another burst of laughter, and, a moment later, Bessie Pike appeared, running swiftly backward, but making no missteps. Graceful as a young fawn she looked at that moment, and she saw neither her father nor lover until she ran into the arms of the former.

Following the girl came a fat and florid-faced Dutch boy of uncertain age. He was making desperate efforts to overtake her and was puffing like an over-driven horse.

"Holy smokes!" he cried, as Bessie found herself in her father's arms. "You vas peat me, ain't it! but you vas kvaut shoost der same."

The girl gave a little cry, then exclaimed:

"Oh, it's you, is it, daddy! I didn't know but—but it was—"

Then she paused and blushed, for her eyes fell on the very person whose name she was about to mention.

That was enough for Conrad. He was a young and impulsive, and he knew from her words and that tell-tale blush that her thoughts had been of him.

"Bessie!"

With that cry, he sprung toward her, his hands outstretched.

Quick as thought, Jim Pike swung his child behind him, and once more a revolver left his belt for a place in his hand.

"Back!" he cried, sternly, leveling the weapon at the young man's head. "Stop whar ye be, ur by ther gods! I'll scatter yer brains!"

The man was in deadly earnest, and Conrad saw to advance meant to meet a death-dealing bullet. The young man was not ready to die just then, and he halted in his tracks, his hands clinched and his whole form rigid.

Little Bess looked on in amazement, her eyes dilated.

"Thet's right," gritted Old Jim. "Now you turn an' go. I will tell ther child ther hull black truth, an' she will know ye left her 'cause ye c'dn't do any better. Ef you don't go, I'll bore ye afore her eyes!"

The girl uttered a cry and caught at his hand.

"Father, father, what do you mean? Are you mad?"

"Not mad, but deluded by the false tales of a detestable villain," fell from Conrad's lips.

"Thet will do!" shouted the old man. "You shet, ur I pulls ther trigger! I'll s'plain ter ther gal. She shell know everythin'. *Go! Git out!*"

But Conrad refused to stir.

"You are asking too much, Mr. Pike. You say you will tell her, but I wish you to tell her in my presence."

Old Jim bent and hissed in Bessie's ear:

"Tell him ter go—tell him, ur I'll shoot him whar he stan's! Speak out!"

"You can't mean it, daddy!" she panted.

"But I do mean it! Speak out, Bess, gal!"

She could not understand the situation, or what had brought it about, but it was plain her lover's life was in danger, so she put out her hands, crying:

"Go, Conrad—please go!"

He seemed amazed.

"Do you mean it, Bessie?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Yes, yes! Go—for my sake! Don't hesitate! Go, go!"

He bowed his head for a moment, only to lift it with a gleam of desperation in his eyes and start forward, exclaiming:

"You must hear what I have to say, for—"

"Not er word!" thundered the man with the revolver. "I will tell her w'at I know. Git!"

Conrad read the terrified appeal in the eyes of the beautiful girl he loved, and he knew his life was in great peril, for Old Jim had almost lost control of himself.

The Dutch lad had fallen on his knees and, with clasped hands and wildly rolling eyes, was mumbling some broken words.

After a moment's pause, Conrad slowly spoke: "Well, I will go. But it is not fear that turns me away, Jim Pike; it is the words of your child. She has asked me to go, and I will obey." Then he added, with sudden vehemence: "But do not think for a moment you will be able to keep us apart, old man! I know she loves me, and one day I will possess her in spite of all my enemies! You have listened to the lies of Pascal Boone; but he shall not rob me of her! The time will come—and that sooner than you think—when you will be sorry for what you have done! Then it will be too late, perhaps, to right the wrong."

"Bessie, all I ask is that you will not believe the lies you will hear about me. Farewell for a little time!"

With a wave of his hand, to which she tearfully responded, he turned and walked away toward the camp of Glory Gulch, which lay below.

The following morning two men were climbing the slope toward Old Jim's cabin. There was a great contrast in their appearance, for one was old, small, sharp-faced, beardless, keen-eyed and bow-legged, while the other was young and tall, with broad shoulders and a splendid figure, a rugged, manly face, brown mustache and long curling hair that fell upon his shoulders.

The older man was dressed roughly in cowboy boots and leather leggings, deerskin shirt and broad "Stinson" sombrero. A belt around his waist supported a brace of polished revolvers and a keen-edged bowie-knife. He was plainly a man who had seen much of wild life, and his bowed legs seemed to indicate the greater part of his time was spent in the saddle. He was Reuben Randall or Round-up Rube, a veteran cowboy, and a valuable man he always proved to the rancher who was fortunate enough to secure his services, as his companion had done.

This companion was Christopher Comstock, familiarly known as Cowboy Chris; and the two had become inseparable pals. The younger man was dressed somewhat more fancifully than his companion, his sombrero being light of color and encircled by a gold cord, while he wore a black velvet jacket, cut Mexican fashion, and a black scarf was knotted under the collar of a white silk shirt. Around his waist was a sash of silk, which held his weapons. His pantaloons were of grayish color and were thrust into the tops of high-heeled, silver-spurred boots.

The pals had almost reached the cabin when a series of wild howls as of terror reached their ears. In another moment they saw the door dashed open and the fat Dutch boy came bounding out like a rubber ball, struck his foot against a stone and rolled at their feet. When he sat up they saw he was ghastly pale and his teeth were chattering with apparent terror.

"What's the matter, Hans?" demanded Chris.

"You appear frightened out of your senses."

The boy tried to reply, but was unable to utter a distinct word, so great was his terror.

"Derned ef he hain't skeered!" exclaimed Rube. "Wonder w'at kin hev happened."

"Speak out, Hans!" cried the young cowboy, bending and placing a hand on the frightened fellow's shoulder. "What is it?"

Then the Dutch boy succeeded in gasping, brokenly:

"Cot in himmell! Cot in himmell! Dot leetle Miss Pessie! Dot poor Mister Bike! Deat, Deat!"

"What's that?" shouted Chris. "He must be deranged!"

Then he started for the cabin. Rube attempted to follow, but Hans leaped to his feet and caught the bow-legged cowboy's hand, gasping:

"Oh, don'd, don'd go away in dere! Mister Bike—oh, he vas kilt! He vas murdered und layin' der floor on! Oh, id vas von dretful things!"

Straight into the cabin strode Cowboy Chris, and his eyes fell on a startling, a horrifying spectacle. Stretched on his face in the middle of the room lay old Jim Pike, and between his shoulderblades rose the haft of a knife that was buried in his body. A little rivulet of blood had marked its course across the floor. A glance was enough to show the young cattleman the miner was dead—foully murdered.

Rube entered not far behind Chris, and the two stood staring at the fearful spectacle. At length the bow-legged cowboy spoke, huskily:

"Pore ole Jim! Who c'd hev done it?"

"That I do not know now," came distinctly and slowly from Chris Comstock's lips; "but I will know. Jim Pike was murdered by the hand of some dastardly wretch, and as sure as there is a God in Heaven who spares my life, I will hunt his murderer down and bring him to retribution! I swear it!"

"An' I'll stan' by ye, pard. Hyer's my han' on it."

They clasped hands above the murdered man, and from that moment the assassin of old Jim Pike was doomed.

CHAPTER III.

TAKING THE TRAIL.

"WHAT'S this?" exclaimed Chris, as he bent over the corpse and removed a slip of paper, that had been closely twisted around the hilt of the knife.

"Paper!" cried Rube. "Thar's writin' on it, pard! Mebbe it's er clew!"

There was in truth writing on the slip of paper. It had been done in a scrawling, hurried manner with a lead-pencil.

"Read it, Chris!" came eagerly from the lips of the bow-legged cowboy.

Chris complied, and the following is what he found on the paper:

"The Red Fox has teeth, and this is the way he uses them on an enemy. The old man dies, and the girl becomes the property of White Plume, my lieutenant. It will be useless for the hounds of Glory Gulch to try following my track, for I shall leave no scent and shall be far on my way to my hole before they can start."

No name was signed to the paper, but at the end there was a crude drawing plainly meant to represent a fox.

"I clew, indeed!" cried Chris.

But Rube shook his head, doubtfully.

"Mebbe so; mebbe not," he said. "Ef this wuz ther work o' ther Red Fox, w'd he publish that fac' in this yere manner?"

"It would be like him to do so, for he delights in bloodshed and the reputation his red deeds brings him. He is feared, and he knows it. He snaps his fingers in the faces of his foes. Yes, this would be like the Fox."

"It may be," acknowledged the bow-legged cowboy; "then erg'in, it may be all er blind ter set pursuers on ther wrong track."

"Something tells me it is not a blind. However, we may be able to learn something from Hans. We have not questioned him. It is plain Little Bess is not here. What a blow this will be for Conrad!"

Hans was seen peering fearfully in at the door, and Chris promptly dragged him into the cabin, despite his protestations. The Dutch lad was still shaking with terror.

"Ach, himmell!" he gasped. "V'at a tretful sighd dot vas! It mages mein heart go dumpty-thump shoost like some sdeam hammers! Poor Mister Bike und poor leetle Pessie!"

"Hans," said Chris, sternly, "I want you to tell me what you know about this affair."

"Mein cootness! id vas nottings ad all v'at I know, so helb me!"

"Weren't you in this cabin all night?"

"Yaw."

"Then you must know something about it."

"Nix. I dells you I know nottings ad all."

"Where do you sleep?"

"In der upper sdory."

"And you heard no suspicious sounds below?"

"Dot vas der trute; I nefer hears nottings. Ven I gids sleeing vor peesness, id dakes more as some bowder-mill exblosions to kervake me up. Yaw, dot vas der fact!"

"Derned ef I believe we kin git much out o' him!" grunted Rube, in disappointment.

But Chris had not lost all hope in that direction.

"Who do you think killed Mr. Pike, Hans?" he asked.

"Cootness crasious! how vas you dinks I know, maype? V'at man would vant do kill Mister Bike, under-der-less it vas—id vas—"

"Who?"

"Oh, Shitminy Christmas! id vas ned him ad all! He vould nod do such a tretful things!"

"Speak out! Who do you mean?"

"Miss Pessie's lofers!"

Both Chris and Rube started back in amazement.

"You are right," said the younger cowboy, "he would not do such a thing. But what made you think of him?"

"Vell, he dit haf some quarrel mit Mister Bike yistiddys afternoons."

"A quarrel?"

"Yaw."

Then Chris cried:

"By heavens, Rube! this may mean something!"

"Thet's so," nodded he of the bowed legs.

"What was the quarrel?" asked Chris.

"Vell, I don't shoost under-der-stand der whole uf him, put id vas apoud Miss Pessie und Mister Conrad. Mister Bike he trives Miss Pessie's lofers off ad der muzzles uf his bistol, svearin' all der dimes he vould plow de whole top-side roof uf his heat off if he dit nod git some moves on himselfes. Yaw, dot vas apoud der sizes uf id!"

"By gracious! this is strange!"

Old Rube nodded.

"Right, boys; it's more than strange!"

"Go on, Hans. What followed?"

"Vell, Mister Conrad he vent away, put he svore a creat sveare dot he vould haf dot girls or pu'st some pack-straps uf his preeches tryin'. He doid Mister Bike he vould pe sorry vor v'at he hat done."

"What else?"

"Dot vas apoud all he said."

"What happened after he went away?"

"Mister Bike hat some talks mit Miss Pessie."

"Did you hear it?"

"Yaw, I hear der most uf him."

"What did he say?"

"Vell, he vent vor to dole some dings v'at I don't under-der-stand. He say dot Mister Conrad vas some vellers v'at vas calt Vite Vings, or Vite Blumes, or—or—"

"White Plume?"

"Yaw, dot vas id."

"Holy smoke!"

"Impossible!"

"Nix; dot vas v'at he say."

"The man must have been crazy!"

"Vell," said Hans, slowly, "he sticks to him ven Miss Pessie don'd pelieve dot sdories. He say he haf der proofs, und Miss Pessie say she don'd took some stocks in does proofs. Den he speaks apoud some vellers v'at vas calt der Ret Vox—"

"The Red Fox?"

"Yaw."

"What did he say about that infamous outlaw?"

"He say der Ret Vox uster vas some enemies mit him und dot der oldt score vas nod settled."

Chris and Rube exchanged looks. Suddenly the former cried:

"I don't believe it! Conrad Vincent is no outlaw! Why, he is the most frank-appearing fellow I ever met! I know he is white!"

"I reckoned so merself, lad," came slowly from Rube's lips; "but ye can't most alwas sometimes tell. 'Pearences are mighty decep-tive in menny 'casions. Ef Con is all right—"

"We'll find him in Glory Gulch."

"Sure!"

"If not—"

"We sha'n't find him thar, fer he'll be gone with ther Red Fox."

"Plainly it was the chief outlaw who murdered Old Jim."

"Yep. He hed er-grudge 'g'inst ther ole man."

"Then he is the one we have sworn to bring to justice. Miss Bessie shall be saved from White Plume, if possible."

"She shell!"

The dead man was tenderly lifted and laid on the bunk at one side of the room, the haft of the death-dealing knife still protruding from between his shoulderblades. They left him there, securing the cabin door behind them, and turned their faces toward Glory Gulch.

"It's best ter notify ther sheriff fu'st thing," said Rube; "Then we'll look fer Conrad Vincent. I hope ter God we'll find him!"

Kilmore was almost the first man they met on entering the little mining-camp, and he promised to go at once to Jim Pike's cabin.

In one thing the cowboys were doomed to meet with disappointment. Conrad Vincent was not in the Gulch, and no one seemed to know what had become of him.

"Chris, boy," said Rube, soberly, "it looks bad fer ther feller!"

"It does, in truth, Rube. We must lose no time in taking the trail of the Red Fox, and, if necessary, we will follow like hounds until he seeks refuge in his hole. If Conrad Vincent is his lieutenant—well, so much the worse for Conrad Vincent!"

"Ef we foller ther Red Fox ter his hoel, he'll take us ter ther mountains beyond ther Colorado."

"It makes no difference if he flies to the North Pole! We will follow him as soon as we have seen his victim properly buried. Eh, Rube?"

"We'll do it, lad!"

Once again their hands met in a firm grasp.

At sunset three horsemen had left Glory Gulch far behind, and their faces were turned toward the north. They were Chris, Rube and Roly Poly Hans, for the Dutch lad would not remain behind.

The hounds were on the trail!

CHAPTER IV.

BOONE AND OLD BLOSSOM.

THREE persons had encamped for the night in a desolate gorge in the heart of a wild mountain region. They were Cowboy Chris, Round-up Rube and Roly Poly Hans. Three days had passed since they turned their backs on Glory Gulch.

It happened that at that point a crystal spring gushed from beneath the rocks at one side of the gorge, and the water, which trickled away in a tiny brook, caused an amount of grass to grow sufficient for their horses.

The pack-animal had been unloaded and a small tent, or tarpaulin, pitched. This was scarcely more than a covering to partially protect them should the weather be very severe. It would keep off rain and could be so arranged as to break the force of the icy winds which sweep through the mountain gorges of Arizona at night.

Chris looked after the arrangements of the camp, Rube attended to the horses and Hans searched for wood to build a fire. Wood was not hard to find, for a great number of dead branches had fallen into the gorge from the pinion trees which clung to the walls far above.

In a little while the camp was arranged, horses looked after, fire built, and over some glowing coals Chris was soon broiling delicious slices of antelope steak which were to form the supper provided by Rube's death-dealing rifle.

"Shimminy jewsharps!" exclaimed Hans, rubbing his stomach, rolling his eyes and wetting his lips in anticipation. "Don'd dot schmell pully, I believe! Hurry up meinself, Chris, vor I am so hungry dot mein pack-poses haf made connections mit der puttons on mein vests. Yaw, dot vas some facts!"

"You are always hungry, Hans," smiled the younger cowboy.

"Mein cootness! dot vas so. Nefer in all mein lifes haf I got ernough to eat, und dot vas der trute. I haf eat till I nefer vas able to schwaller some more, put schtill I vas hungry! Id vas some terrible things to eggsberience dose sensations, you pets you!"

"I should say so!"

In a few moments some of the steak was ready, and Hans was given the first slice.

While they were eating Old Rube said:

"Waal, Chris, hyer we be so fur on ther way."

"And we know we are on the right scent."

"Yep."

"The camp-fire, the tracks and the bit of cloth—those things tell us we are not on a false trail."

"Sure! Thet wuz er scrap o' Bessie's dress ye foun' this mornin'."

"It was."

"Ther Fox is leadin' us er good chase, but ther trail grows hotter. It's er derved pity we can't foller it by night. That's whar they hev ther 'vantage o' us."

"You are right, but they must have some rest. They cannot travel night and day both."

"No; but they kin travel in ther night an' rest durin' ther heat o' ther day. Ye see they hev ther 'vantage o' us in thet, fer we hev ter keep peggin' erlong on ther trail right through ther hottest part o' ther day. 'Sides thet, we hev bin in luck 'nother way. Ef we wuz ter hev er good stiff storm, it'd blot out ther trail completely."

"I fear that the most of anything."

"Me too. In these yere parts ye never know w'en er thunder shower may come up."

Suddenly Rube lifted one hand warningly.

"Hark!" he hissed.

They listened and heard the distant sound of iron-shod hoofs. The sounds were approaching.

"Some galoot's comin'!" declared the bow-legged cowboy. "Thar hain't but one, an' he's mounted on er shod critter, so I reckon he's w'ite. All ther same he may he er derved skunk, so we'll be reddy fer him."

The three laid their hands on convenient weapons, Hans producing a huge rusty-looking revolver.

"I pets you your life dot veller gits hurt if he tries some funny games!" grimly nodded the Dutch lad.

The galloping horse came nearer and nearer, the ring of hoofs awakening hundreds of clattering echoes in the gorge. Suddenly the horse stopped, as if thrown back on its haunches.

It had grown quite dark in the gorge by this time, but Rube dimly saw the figure of horse and rider, both having appeared beyond a bend in the gulch. The man had promptly drawn rein at sight of the fire.

"Hello, you!" he called.

"Hello yerself!" retorted Rube.

"Who are you?"

"White men."

For a few moments the horseman seemed to hesitate, then he rode slowly forward.

"All white men are not friends," he said, as he came nearer.

"We claim ter be hones' men," asserted the bow-legged cowboy.

"If your claim is true, we are friends without a doubt," declared the stranger, as he rode into the circle of light made by the fire. "And in case we are friends, I have struck your camp in an opportune time, for I am nearly famished and my good horse is perishing for water."

"Thar's feed an' drink hyer fer both."

They saw the stranger was a young man of not more than twenty-four or five. He was dressed in a plain suit of woolen stuff, and a Winchester repeating rifle was slung at his back. A belt of weapons encircled his waist. His eyes were coal-black and a dark mustache shaded his lips.

For some reason Rube was not favorably impressed with the stranger, and, at the same time, he fancied he had seen him before.

"Yer face looks familiar, pard," asserted the veteran cattleman.

"And so does yours," was the prompt retort.

"I am sure I have seen you somewhere. Where could it have been? In Prescott? I reckon not. In Yuma? Well, hardly. In Phoenix? No. Then it must have been—"

"In Glory Gulch."

"That's the place—the very place! And this other gentleman"—turning to Chris—"I reckon I saw him there."

"It is quite likely, as we came directly from the place together."

"Well, well! I am glad to meet you! Shake, pard! I am Pascal Boone, and I am striking for Hackberry City."

A general introduction and handshaking followed.

"Strikin' fer Hackberry City, did ye say?" asked Rube, when the handshaking was over.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are outer yer way."

"How is that?"

"You are too fur east."

"So? Well, then, I have been misdirected. I am sorry, for I do not wish to lose any time in getting to Hackberry, as urgent business calls me there. In Hackberry I am to meet a man who owns some mining property I wish to secure. If I do not arrive there promptly at the time set, I may lose my chance."

"Waal, ye can't travel no furdur ter-night, so ye may as well stay with us."

Boone confessed this was true, and seemed glad to find companions for the night. His horse was soon cared for, and he was eating with the others. Hans watched Pascal Boone closely, and there was a strange look in the depths of the Dutch lad's eyes.

When their hunger was satisfied Hans found an opportunity to whisper in Chris Comstock's ear:

"I don'd like dot fellers some leedle bits. I haf saw him talkin' mit Mister Bike only der day before he vas murdered."

Chris scarcely understood why he started, and a thrill ran over him, while he looked at Pascal Boone with increased interest.

In the course of conversation, Boone observed: "I saw an old schoolmate at Glory Gulch."

As no one spoke, he added:

"His name is Vincent—Conrad Vincent."

In an instant both Chris and Rube started up, uttering exclamations of surprise.

"What's that?" cried the younger cowboy. "Conrad Vincent? Were you a schoolmate of his?"

"I was."

"Waal, I sw'ar!" drawled Rube.

"Do you gentlemen know him?" asked Boone.

"Know him? Waal, you bet! W'at kin ye tell us of him?"

"I am sorry to say I can tell you no good."

Chris and Rube exchanged significant glances. "No good?" repeated Chris. "Why, Vincent appeared like a fine fellow."

"He came from a low family. His mother's reputation was none too good, and his father died in jail while awaiting trial for murder. Vincent himself was forced to run away from his native town to keep from being arrested for attempted murder."

"Waal, I'll be chawed up!" gasped Rube.

The younger cowboy said nothing, but he was studying Pascal Boone's face closely.

"Vincent made a fine appearance at school," Boone went on, not appearing to notice the stir his words had created; "and it was hoped he would make a decent man for all of his parentage. But, in the long run, blood will tell. He was an infernal rascal at heart, and—"

"So be you, by gum!"

The words were spoken by a strange voice, and a tall figure stepped out of the darkness into the circle of light made by the fire. It was an old man with wonderfully long legs, and a round, bullet-like head. There was no beard on his face, and his homely features were distorted by a grin that would have "stopped a clock." He was dressed in a decidedly slouchy manner, but carried a handsome rifle in his hand.

"Yes sir-ee boh!" he nodded, pausing and pointing one long, bony finger at Pascal Boone. "You're an infernal rascal, by chowder! I know you, an' I reckon you know me!"

"It's Ole Blossom!" shouted Round-up Rube.

"Dan Pike, as I live!" burst from Cowboy Chris's lips.

"Thet's yer humble servint," affirmed the old fellow, bobbing his head and stretching his mouth in a still broader grin. "I'm hyer, ther hull blessed length o' me, an' by Jinks! I 'low I kem in jest ther right time ter keep you chaps frum losin' somep'n."

"Losing something?"

"Yep."

"What?"

"Yer hosses."

"What kin ye mean?" asked Rube.

Old Blossom pointed at Pascal Boone once more.

"D'yer know this yere critter—this gentle dovey-dove—this sweet-scented honey-bunch? Waal, I reckon not, else ye w'dn't be er 'tarnal thick with him. W'y, pard! thet galoot is Slippery Shane, ther p'isonest hoss-thief in all Arizona!"

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER AVENGER.

OLD BLOSSOM's words certainly produced a sensation. Both the cowboys uttered exclamations of amazement, for they had heard of the famous horse-lifter, Slippery Shane. Pascal Boone also uttered an exclamation, but it was one of anger and disgust, and his hand darted toward a weapon.

The tall vagabond was looking for just such a move, and, with remarkable swiftness, he covered the accused with a cocked revolver.

"Oh, come off yer perch, Shaney!" he chuckled, in his odd manner, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Don't be puttin' yer leetle fingers on thet gun 'less ye wants ter j'ine ther Heavenly Choir, fer ef ye do, I'll giv ye er large, large dost o' pills—lead ones. Thet's b-i-z-n-i-s, business."

"You old fool!" cried Boone. "What do you mean by this? I am an honest man—"

"Tut, tut, tut, Shaney! Keerful, keerful! Don't make thet kind o' tork ter yer uncle, fer he knows ye frum A ter izzard, he does. You stole an elegant hoss o' me oncet, an' then I swore a great swear I'd tread on your coat-tail some day. Ther time fer treadin' hed ter come, an' hyer she be."

"I do not know you, old man," protested Boone. "You have made a mistake."

"Nary mistake."

"But I can prove to you I am Pascal Boone, late of Prescott."

Old Blossom waved his hand, carelessly.

"That's all right, Shaney. You might be able ter prove ye wuz ther Pope o' Rome straight frum Romany, but ye'd be Slippery Shane jest ther same."

"You are drunk or crazy?"

Boone arose to his feet and glared at Old Blossom, who returned the look with a broad grin and a wink that contorted the whole side of his face.

"How er pore fly will kick w'en he gits his feet stuck in the soup! I reckon you will go with me ter see the Sheriff o' Hackberry City."

"That is where I am going."

"Now you are shoutin'."

"But, I'm not going with you!" shouted Boone, leaping forward and knocking Old Blossom's weapon aside. "Try that for a warm seat, you old fool!"

With a dextrous trip and a whirl, he sent the old vagabond into the very center of the fire, and the blazing brands were scattered in many directions.

Old Blossom scrambled from his scorching position with more haste than grace, shouting:

"Don't let ther varmint escape! Holy blisters! Shoot him! Oh, great blazes! Salt him!"

Some of the flying brands had struck Roly Poly Hans, and the Dutch lad mingled his howls with those of Old Blossom.

"Mein cootness!" he squawked. "I vas all purnt up, I believe! Ouch! Dutterations! Dot coal—ow, dot coal! So helb me Yawcob, id vas gone down der whole length of mein packs! Ow-wow-wow! Id vas stobbed! id vas stobbed! Woo-woo-woo! Vor Cott sakes turn some vater der pack uf me down pefore I am purnt to von plisters! Yow-yow! yee-yeel yi-yi!"

The fat lad was on his feet, dancing like a jumping-jack, while he nearly turned himself wrong side out trying to reach down the back of his neck and get at the coal. It happened Old Blossom had not been burned a bit, and the comical sight of the gyrations through which the fat lad was passing appeared to him as utterly ridiculous. In a moment he had forgotten the man he had accused of being a horse-thief, and was rolling on the ground, fairly shouting with laughter.

"Oh, Smotherin' Moses! looker thet!" he screamed, as the Dutch lad jumped and howled once more. "Oh, I reckon I shell die dead! Oh, ham fat and fried tripe! Ha, ha, ha! he, he, he!"

Then Hans was mad.

"You dunderin' vool!" yelled the tortured lad. "V'at vor I laugh ad me v'en you purns mein pack dot vay? Don'd you know somedings ad all, I guess nod! Wow! Come here to you and git dot coal pefore id sets mein clothes der fire on! Dunder and blitzers! dot vas der hottest coal v'at I nefer saw!"

Boone had improved the opportunity thus given him. The moment Old Blossom went down in the fire, he leaped toward the point where his horse stood already bridled and saddled, for, strange to say, he had not removed these trappings, although he pretended to do so.

"Stop him, lad!" shouted Round-up Rube, and the two cowboys sprung to intercept the desperate man.

They were a moment too late. Boone reached his horse and flung himself into the saddle.

"You infernal idiots!" he cried, in furious rage.

A revolver leaped to his hand, and, just as Chris reached the side of his horse, he dashed the weapon into the younger cowboy's face and pulled the trigger.

There was a click, but no report.

By rare good fortune the cartridge was a poor one.

However, Chris was sent reeling backward by the blow, and the next moment Boone's horse carried him down the gorge.

Round-up Rube promptly opened fire, but he was obliged to shoot according to his best judgment, as the darkness of the place quickly screened both horse and rider.

On went the horse, and no cry of pain told the rider had been struck. In a few moments the bow-legged cowboy knew Pascal Boone was beyond the reach of bullets.

"Derned ef he hain't got erway!" he growled, in disgust. "I don't wonder they call him slippery, blamed ef I do!"

Chris was rubbing his forehead where the muzzle of Boone's revolver had left its mark.

"We were a bit too slow, pard," he said. "All the same, it was lucky for me his weapon missed fire."

They turned back to the fire, and found Old

Blossom inspecting his scorched clothes, while Hans was feeling up one leg of his pantaloons in search for the coal that had caused him to dance in such a lively manner.

"Are ye burnt, pard?" asked Rube.

"Nary burn," replied the old nomad; "but it's er derned wonder thet I hain't."

"Vell, maype I vas nod purnt!" growled Hans. "Der whole uf mein pack vas roasted fit vor eadings, so helb me! Und v'en I vas purntin' up, all dot veller do vas roll der cround on und laugh like he vas struck some minstrel shows! Py dunder! I don'd vorgit dot very soon, you pets mein life!"

Hans found the coal, which was still warm, and brought it to light. It had not set his clothes afire, but it had really burned his flesh somewhat.

"I see thet critter got erway," observed Old Blossom.

"Yes, he escaped by a close shave."

"He is the hardest man to ketch and hold in ther Territory. I wuz lookin' fer him ter play some kind o' er trick, but derned ef he didn't fool me then."

"But how comes it you fellers are hyer? I wuz jest strikin' fer Glory Gulch ter see Jim."

A silence fell upon them. Who should break to Old Blossom the sad news of his brother's death? The old man saw the change in their faces and cried:

"Hello! w'at's happened? Ye all look as blue as whetstones! Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah! it can't be anythin' hes happened ter Jim—it can't be!"

Still no one spoke.

"Speak up an' tell me!" cried the old vagabond, an anxious look on his homely face.

"How is it? w'at is it? Jim—"

Cowboy Chris laid a hand on Old Blossom's arm, speaking softly:

"Dan, your brother Jim is dead."

The tall man reeled back as if struck in the face.

"Dead!" he gasped. "Jim? My God! ye can't mean thet?"

"It is true, Dan."

Then the younger cowboy was forced to tell the whole story, while Old Blossom listened like one dazed. When the end was reached the brother of the murdered man cried:

"So Red Fox has kept his word! He wuz Jim's enemy, an' Jim tole me ther cuss hed swore ter take his life. Waal, as shore as thar is a Heaven above us, he shall pay fer thet act with his blood! You say you are on ther trail o' ther Fox. Waal, I am with ye ter ther death, an' we'll foller him like beagles tell he is run ter 'arth!"

"And we will do our best to save Little Bess," said Chris.

"Right, boy, we'll save her, shore! But, do you believe thet Con Vincent is Red Fox's leftenant?"

"I do not."

"Ner do I. I reckon thet boy wuz w'ite ter ther core."

"His disappearance from Glory Gulch duzn't look right," put in Rube.

"Mebbe not, but, he hain't White Plume, nary time! I run with thet lad afore you fellers ever sot eyes on him, an' I 'low he's built o' proper stuff. Thar hain't no coward's blood in his veins."

"Did ye heur w'at Slippery Shane wuz sayin' 'bout him?"

"Some o' it; but I w'u'dn't b'lieve thet critter under oath. He'd lie w'en it wur ter his 'vantage ter tell ther truth, an' as fer Red Fox, I saw ther critter face ter face oncet, an' I know him."

"What is he like?" eagerly asked the young cowboy.

"He is a hafe-blood Injun, an' ther red-skin part o' him shows er heap more'n ther w'ite. Thet's w'y he's called ther Red Fox. He's er critter as delights in bloodshed, an' his crimes are enough ter hang him a dozen times. He is almost as slippery as Shane, fer ther time I saw him he declared who he wuz, arter he had shot an enemy in a Tombstone saloon, an' then he jumped from er window an' got clean erway. They bev hed it thet he wuz killed 'bout twenty times, but he alwus comes ter life erg'in."

"Well, we have sworn to finish him, and we will do the work before we leave his trail," asserted Chris.

"Now you be shoutin', boy! He's got ter go under ther sod this time. W'en he wiped out Jim Pike he sealed his own doom. Ef he downs any o' us, ther others'll only keep ther hotter on his trail. He has waked up ther wrong crowd this yere time, an' he'll find it out afore long, the imp of Hades that he is."

CHAPTER VI.

BULLY 'BIJE AND BLACK BENDER.

THE sun had set and darkness was gathering when the four avengers rode into a little mining-camp known as Devil's Diggings. There were not more than a dozen buildings in the place, but one of those was a combined hotel and saloon.

"Thar's whar we'd best putt up fer ther night, I reckon," observed Round-up Rube.

The others thought so, and they rode toward the hotel. In front of the building the bow-legged cowboy uttered a yell that brought half a dozen persons to the door.

"Whar's ther hostler?" inquired Rube.

"Hostler?" snorted a broad-shouldered man with flaming red whiskers, waddling forward and ejecting a mouthful of tobacco-juice. "Woosh! W'at d'yer take this yar howtel fer! Hostler? Great thunder! D'yer think you be in New York? D'yer want them critters 'tended ter?"

"Thet's w'at we want, pard."

"Waal, you'll find er shed round back of ther howtel, an' I reckon you kin look arter yer own hosses. I'm Fiery Finch, ther proprietor of this yar ranch, an' I'm er powerful good man ter stop with ef ye don't go ter puttin' on too menny airs. Ef thar's ary one thing in this yar worl' I can't stan' it's airs. Ther cuss as says I don't know how ter run er howtel has ter fight me!"

"It's all right, lan'lord," laughed Rube. "Thar hain't nobody kickin'."

"Good ernough! You'll find fodder in ther shed. W'en ye gits yer critters 'tended ter, kem in an' try our grub. We'll make it pleasant fer ye while ye stay, bet yer boots!"

The four rode around the building to the shed, Old Blossom laughing for the first time since hearing of his brother's death.

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sessages o' ole Noah!" he snickered. "This yere's w'at I calls er sociable sort o' a recepshun! By gum! but thet galoot duz know how ter run er hotel!"

"Dutteration!" exclaimed Hans, shrugging his shoulders. "Dose v'iskers uf his mages me t'ink uf dot coal as vent der pack uf me down. Dot vellers coul't mage some vortunes uf he hires himselfe out to a railroad's some danger signals. Yaw, dot vas apoud der facts."

They reached the shed and were attending to their horses when they noticed a man approaching through the gloom. As he came nearer, they saw he was a rough-looking fellow and walked with a slight limp. He had been among the number brought to the door by Round-up Rube's yell. His face was covered by a bushy black beard, and an old hat was slouched over his eyes.

"Howdy, pards," he saluted, in a hoarse voice, as he reached them. "Frum Bowie Bar?"

"Naw," was Rube's curt reply.

"Coffin Crick?"

"Naw."

"Hackberry City?"

"Naw."

"Satan's Gap?"

"Naw."

"Ner Mineral Springs?"

"Naw."

"Ner—ner Cussid Camp?"

"Naw."

"Ner—ner— Wal, whar in blazes be ye frum?"

"I don't 'low thet's any o' your derned business. Now hain't ye glad ye've foun' out?"

The man of the bushy whiskers fairly gasped for breath.

"Waal—I'll—be—jiggered!" he remarked, with emphasis. Then he came close to the bow-legged cowboy, set his arms akimbo, thrust out his chin and glared at the cattleman.

"D'yer know me?" he asked.

Rube placed his arms akimbo, thrust out his chin and returned the glare with interest.

"Naw," he answered; "an' I'm derned glad I don't."

This did not disconcert the stranger in the least.

"I am Bully 'Bije o' Bloody Bar," he declared. "I'm ther feller that killed Buffalo Bill."

"Waal, is thet so? This is ther fu'st I've heard o' Bill's demise. How long sence ye killed him?"

"Jest thirteen days. I kill er man once ev'ry thirteen days. This yere's my day fer killin'."

"Sho! Then ther best thing you kin do is go kermit suicide. It'll be er derned good thing fer yerself, an' ev'rybody else. You never will be missed."

"Ham fat an' fried sassage!" snickered Old Blossom. "Ax him fer a lock o' his whiskers ter p'izen rats with, Reuben."

Bully 'Bije glared around at the four persons who were watching him with interest and amusement.

"I see through ther hull durned villainous plot!" he suddenly howled. "You galoots hev heerd w'at a bad man I be, an' you want ter hev ther reppytashun of killin' me. You bev sot er trap fer me! Woof! Be keerful! Bully 'Bije hain't ter be fooled with! Guv me room!"

Then he began to back cautiously away, not heeding the laughter caused by his singular movements. As soon as he was at a safe distance, he sung out that he would see them later, then wheeled and hurried back to the front of the hotel.

Having attended to their horses, the avengers entered the hotel, keeping a lookout for the Man from Bloody Bar; but, Bully 'Bije was not to be seen. Having paid their bill in advance, they were shown to the table, where a "square meal" had been prepared for them.

After they had eaten, they sauntered into the bar-room, and there they discovered Bully 'Bije. The Man from Bloody Bar was seated at a rather rickety card-table, engaged in a little game with another individual, who looked fully as rough and who also wore a full black beard. It was plain 'Bije was winning, for he was laughing uproariously.

"Tork about playin' poker!" he cried hoarsely. "W'y, stranger, you hain't larnt ther roodyments of ther game! Who be ye, anyhow? I clean fergot ter ax yer name."

"I'm generally called Black Bender," was the reply.

"So! Any relashun ter ther Kansas Benders?"

"Wal, mebbe so."

"Whoop! You're ther galoot I'm lookin' fer! I s'pose you've heerd of Bully 'Bije o' Bloody Bar?"

"Can't say I ever did."

"W'at! Waal, thet's durned strange, I sw'ar! I'm er killer, I am, an' this yere's my day fer killin'. Look out fer me."

"Oh, come off yer perch an' git down ter keerds! You like ter hear yerself tork, you do?"

Bully 'Bije leaned on the table, thrust out his chin and glared at Black Bender, who dealt the cards without seeming to notice the posture of the Man from Bloody Bar.

"Sa-ay!"

Bender looked up, in apparent surprise.

"W'at's ther matter with you?" he inquired.

Bully 'Bije struck the table a resounding blow with his fist.

"You want ter go er leetle slow, pard!" he cried. "Chaw me up ef I'll take any sass!"

Bender looked disgusted.

"You make me tired!" he retorted. "Ef you are goin' ter play keerds with me, I want ye ter play. Ef ye hain't goin' ter play, say so."

"Wal, I'm hyer ter play; but durned ef I'll stan' so much of your chin!"

"Then keep still yerself an' it'll be all right. Come, shove up ther ante. Thet's ther stuff. Now I'll stay with ye. How menny keerds will ye take?"

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" exclaimed Old Blossom. "Thar's ap' ter be some fur fly afore thet game is over. Let's git whar we kin watch ther keerds, pards."

CHAPTER VII.

UNMASKED.

THE four moved toward the table where the two black-bearded men were playing, Chris taking a position where he could look into the hand of the Man from Bloody Bar.

Bully 'Bije held three cards, a pair of trays and an ace, calling for two from the pack. Black Bender also took two, and then he "chipped" a dollar.

"Wow!" exclaimed 'Bije, as he looked at his cards and discovered he had drawn another pair of trays, making him four of a kind. "Hain't ye jumpin' onter thet er leetle heavy, partner?"

"I reckon not," was Bender's calm reply.

"I 'low ye're bluffin'."

"Think so?"

"Yep."

"Wal, you kin find out ef you pay ter see my papers."

"Is—thet—so! I reckon you don't know me. I hain't ter be bluffd, I hain't, so I sees yer dollar an' goes ye five better."

Black Bender laughed.

"So thet's yer game! Wa-al, hyer's yer five, an' I sets ye ten."

Bully 'Bije placed his cards face downward on the table and leaned forward to peer into Bender's face.

"Praps you think you kin work thet on

'Bijah!" he cried. "Wal, I sh'ud smile! Hyer goes yer ten, an' I makes it twenty-five."

Again Black Bender laughed.

"W'at's ther limit?" he inquired.

"We 'greed on fifty dollars."

"All right. Hyer's yer twenty-five, an' right hyer's fifty more. How's thet fer a bluff?"

"It hain't nary bit of good," chuckled the Man from Bloody Bar. "Hyer goes fifty 'long with fifty more atop of thet."

Bender glanced at his cards, then set 'Bije another fifty. With remarkable promptness the Man from Bloody Bar raised again. The game was decidedly exciting, and Chris wondered what Bender could have.

"I don't want ter rob ye," said Black Bender, "so I calls."

'Bije promptly showed his cards, and an exclamation of surprise and dismay came from the other player's lips.

"Looker thet!" he cried, exposing his hand. "Hain't thet er pecter han' ter be beat on!"

He held three kings and a pair of queens.

"Oh, ye bucked up erg'inst ther wrong man w'en ye tackled Bully 'Bije!" laughed the winner, as he raked in the stakes.

"But you hain't done with me yit. I'll git onter you afore we are done. It's your deal."

'Bije dealt the cards and stayed in, raising the ante fifty cents. Bender promptly made a raise of a dollar, and the ball was fairly opened. The Man from Bloody Bar raised again to five dollars, and Bender promptly made it ten. 'Bije shoved twenty-five into the pot, whereupon Bender added the necessary fifteen, and announced himself ready to draw. He took two cards, but was filled with dismay when his opponent stood "pat."

"Say, w'at kind of er racket be you workin' on me?" he growled.

"It'll cost ye jest fifty dollars ter find out," answered the Man from Bloody Bar, counting out that sum and adding it to the stakes.

With an exclamation of fury Bender dashed his hand upon the table, revealing three seven spots.

"I'd guv suthin' ter see your keerds," he declared: "but fifty dollars is too much."

"You don't call?"

"No."

"Then ther pot is mine?"

"Yep."

"Wa-al, you kin see my keerds," laughed 'Bije, as he raked in the stakes, and placed the pasteboards in full view. "Whoop! Hain't it er daisy!"

The words which escaped Black Bender's lips were more forcible than polite, for he discovered he had been bluffd out of the pot, as Bully 'Bije had not held a pair, his hand being nothing but a bob-tail flush with king high.

"Smart, hain't ye!" snarled Bender, as the spectators burst into laughter. "Wal, you keep on! Thar's er time comin' w'en you'll laff outer t'other corner of yer mouth!"

It became plain to every one that, despite his inclination to talk, Bully 'Bije was "no slouch" at poker.

The game went on, and for some time it seemed to run about even. Both men seemed on the alert for trickery on the part of the other.

At length it was plain both had secured good hands, for the stakes were raised several times before cards were drawn. Then Black Bender stood "pat" with four kings and an ace in his hand. He found it difficult to restrain his delight as Bully 'Bije took one card.

The Man from Bloody Bar opened the ball with a bet of ten dollars, which Bender promptly saw, adding twenty-five more to the pot. 'Bije took another look at his cards, as if to make sure what he held, then set his opponent to the full extent of the limit. Bender pretended to hesitate and look doubtfully at his hand.

"I reckon you're bluffin' erg'in," he observed. Bully 'Bije winked oddly.

"Think so?" he inquired.

"Yep. I'm goin' ter set you fifty."

"Mebbe I hain't bluffin'."

"Wal, bluffin' ur no bluffin', thar goes the money."

"An' hyer goes a hundred, which sets you fifty."

"Boun' ter keep it up, eh? Wal, I'll stay right with ye! You'll find Black Bender er stayer fer ther long run. Fifty better'n you."

'Bije looked at his opponent inquiringly.

"I reckon you think you kin drive me 'cause you stood pat an' I took one keerd," he said. "Wal, you'll find I hain't ther sardine ter be druv. Let her went, Maria! Hyer goes fifty more'n you!"

"You mought as well kiss yer money good-bye w'en ye puts it inter ther pot," chuckled Bender. "You'll never see it erg'in."

"Don't be too shore of thet."

"I've got er worl'-beater hyer."

"Ef you beat my han' you'll be welcome ter ther pot."

Again and again were the stakes raised, neither man seeming inclined to call.

"Your money holds out well," observed Bender, at length. "I'm down ter bed-rock. This yere's my last fifty, so I'll hev ter call ye. But fer thet, I'd sot hyer all night an' keep' shovin' up ther fifties, fer I hev ye beat. Jest looker thet han'! Four kings an' an ace, which fixes it so you can't hole four aces erg'in me. Ther boodle's mine."

"Hole on!" shouted Bully 'Bije. "Jest take er look at these keerds afore ye burns yer fingers on thet wealth! Hain't thet a sight fer sore eyes! I ketched ther queen on ther draw!"

Then he exposed a straight heart flush with a queen at the head!

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" cried Old Blossom. "Looker thet, looker thet!"

For a moment Black Bender seemed stunned; then, as he saw his successful opponent reach to gather in the stakes, he uttered a savage snarl, whipped out a knife and struck with the intention of pinning 'Bije's hand to the table.

The Man from Bloody Bar saw the devil that gleamed in the eyes of Black Bender and snatched his hand away.

Not a moment too soon!

The knife-blade was buried in the table, piercing several of the bills that helped make up the pot.

"Durned ef ye kin play thet on me, all ther time!" howled Bender, with fury. "Thar wuz foul play 'bout thet, an' ther money's mine!"

"There was no foul play," declared Cowboy Chris. "I stood where I could look into this man's hand, and he played an honest game. He drew the queen to fill in a fair and square manner. Hands off that money!"

With this order, he covered Black Bender with a ready revolver.

The baffled gambler fell back in his chair, growling like an angry dog.

"Ef Christopher says it's straight, you kin bet yer life it is straight, my lulu," observed Old Blossom. "How-umdever, I reckon I know o' suthin' thet hain't jest straight. You have been playin' er crooked game, even though you wuz beat. I reckon you're crooked all through, an' mebbe I'd know ye better ef this yere beard wuz removed. It must be powerful uncomfortable ter wear on er hot night."

The old hills tramp bent over Black Bender, and, twining his long fingers in the man's beard, gave a sudden jerk. The beard proved to be false, for it came off in his hand!

"Fu'st skelp fer me!" shouted Old Blossom, waving it aloft.

But, the others were staring at the face revealed by the sudden unmasking.

"Slippery Shane!"

The cry came from Cowboy Chris and Round-up Rube; but, Bully 'Bije shouted with delight:

"It is Pascal Boone!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BITTER FOES.

IN a moment the money was forgotten. Bully 'Bije leaped to his feet, dashing his hat to the floor. The next instant all were astonished to see him tear away the beard that had concealed his features, for they saw that also was false.

Conrad Vincent stood revealed!

"I have found you, Pascal Boone!" he shouted. "Now you shall swallow the lies you have told about me, you heartless villain!"

Boone was the most astonished man in the room, and he stared at Conrad as if he saw an apparition. Although in disguise himself, he had not dreamed "Bully 'Bije" was anything but what he seemed, a blustering braggart.

"Vincent!" he gasped.

"Yes, Vincent; the man about whom you have lied like the thief in the night you are! You left Glory Gulch in the night, but I found you had started for Bowie Bar. I lost no time in following, but you were shrewd enough to cover your trail. For some time I have been on a blind hunt, but I have found you at last."

Boone had now recovered from his consternation, and an insolent leer settled on his face.

"Well, now you have found me, what are you going to do about it?" he demanded.

"I am going to force you to swallow your lies."

"Easier said than done, perhaps; but I deny I ever told any lies about you."

"You know you have!"
 "What were they?"
 "You told Jim Pike that I belonged to Red Fox's band of outlaws."
 "Well?"
 "Do you deny it?"
 "No."

"You knew it was a lie when you told him so, but you were determined to do me injury on account of the old hatred you still cherish for me."

"I told him nothing but the truth. You are White Plume, lieutenant for the Red Fox." For a moment it seemed that Conrad would launch himself at the throat of his insolent accuser, but, Chris Comstock's hand fell on his shoulder, and the cowboy's voice sounded in his ear:

"Slow and easy, pard! That is the only way to deal with this fellow. If he has lied, we will squeeze the truth from him before we let up."

After a moment, Conrad spoke slowly:

"Boone, you know you have lied about me. You could have had no object but my injury, and in that you succeeded. Old Jim Pike turned against me, but I swore he should be sorry for so doing, and he shall."

Boone laughed, sneeringly.

"You play your part well!" he said. "As if you did not know!"

"Know what?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Hear him! And you had a hand in the black work!"

"What are you talking about?"

"About your red deed. You swore to possess Bessie Pike, and you kept your word, even though it cost blood."

Conrad seemed dazed.

"I do not understand you. Blood? What can you mean by your words?"

"You are a skillful actor, Vincent. Yes, you swore to make Jim Pike sorry, and you struck at the old man's life. Perhaps your hand did not slay him, but the hand of your chief did, and you were the cause of it all."

"Slay him! What can you mean by such talk? Jim Pike is not dead?"

"He is, and his blood cries out against you!"

Conrad recoiled a step, his face growing pale.

"Look!" cried Pascal Boone, rising to his feet and pointing at the young man's pallid countenance. "See him grow pale! That shows his guilt! It is written on his face!"

Chris Comstock's hand was on Conrad's arm, and the cowboy's voice sounded in his ear once more.

"Brace up, Con!" he said, anxiously. "Don't let him shake your nerve!"

"But—but, is it true?"

"Yes, it is true that Old Jim is dead."

"And Bessie—"

"Has been abducted by the Red Fox."

"My God!"

With a wild cry, Conrad started forward, reaching across the table and clutching Pascal Boone by the shoulder.

"You devil!" he shouted. "So, that was your game! You led me on a false scent, while you did your foul work! And now you charge me with the crime! By the gods, I will—"

"Hands off, Vincent!" cried Boone, and he drew back his clinched fist to strike the other in the face.

"Not so fast, critter!" came from the lips of the bow-legged cattleman, as he caught the threatening arm. "Putt on ther brakes, thar!"

"Am I to fight this whole crowd?" demanded Boone. Then he pursed his lips and gave a peculiar whistle. In a moment four or five men moved toward him.

"Look out for his pards, Rube!" cried Chris, as a brace of revolvers leaped into his hands.

"Ham fat that sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" chuckled old Blossom. "This yere's goin' ter be a reg'lar ole-fashioned time, by gum!"

"Dot vas apoud der sizes uf der case," agreed Hans, producing his rusty pistol. "I pets you your life somepody gids hurt if they growd some roosters! Yaw, dot vas some facts."

"This feller hes guv hisself clean erway!" asserted Rube, still clinging to Boone. "How in blazes did he know o' Jim Pike's death? He hed lef' Glory Gulch w'en thet wuz made known."

Boone growled a savage imprecation, for he saw he had made a bad blunder. At that moment a secret signal passed between him and one of his men near at hand, and the fellow quickly left the room.

"You know too much, old man!" snarled the rascal. "Take your hand from my shoulder!"

"Leave him to me, Rube," urged Conrad. "He is my bitter foe, and I alone should deal with him. All I ask is that you keep his friends from taking a hand. I have longed for the hour when he and I would stand face to face, and now that hour has come."

"Yes," sneered Boone, "it has come, and what are you going to do?"

"I have told you what I intend doing."

"Bah!"

"If Old Jim Pike is dead, you killed him! If Bessie has been abducted, you abducted her! You shall answer for the old man's life! Where have you taken his child? Speak! Answer, or I will choke the breath from your vile body!"

"That talk sounds well, but it will not work. Take your hands off!"

"Not till you have come to terms!"

Boone's right hand darted toward a pocket where a weapon was concealed, but Conrad caught his wrist. Thus the two enemies stood glaring into each other's eyes, between them the table and on it the money for which they had been playing, the knife still standing where it had been driven when the defeated gamester struck at his opponent's hand.

At this moment from some point in the upper part of the building came a wild shriek as of a female in distress.

"Great God!" cried Conrad Vincent. "That was Bessie's voice!"

CHAPTER IX.

FOILED.

In a moment the young man had wheeled from Pascal Boone, the rascal forgotten at the sound of that voice.

Boone saw his opportunity and flashed out a revolver. Up came his hand till Conrad's back was covered, then he pulled the trigger.

Just as the weapon spoke his arm was dashed upward, and the indignant voice of Round-up Rube sounded in his ears.

"You miserable cuss!"

Then the hard fist of the bow-legged cowboy struck Boone under the right ear, and the fellow measured his length on the floor.

Conrad had not realized his peril, for he was bounding toward the door that led to the stairs. Cowboy Chris followed at his heels.

Up the stairs went Vincent, his heart in his mouth and his ears strained to hear that voice again.

"Bessie, Bessie!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

It was dark in the corridor above, and he was unable to tell which way to turn. Once more he cried:

"Bessie, Bessie! Where are you? Answer, and I will come!"

What was that? A smothered cry seemed to come from one of the rooms, but he could not tell which one. By this time Chris was at his side.

"Down with the doors!" shouted the young cowboy, and he set the example by hurling himself against one of them and bursting into a room.

Conrad saw that was the only thing to do, and he placed his shoulder against the nearest door, which went down before his strength, and he staggered into the room. He was just in time to see a man getting out through a window that opened upon a shed roof.

"Here they are!" he yelled.

In another moment he was at the window, and although it was very dark, he saw two men lowering something like a body over the edge of the roof. He knew well enough it was the kidnapped girl, and he sprang through the window.

Just as Conrad reached the roof, one of the men wheeled with an arm outstretched. Then came a bright flash, the sharp report of a revolver, a deep groan, and the young man fell back upon the window-sill.

Cowboy Chris had reached the door of the room, and he saw Conrad fling up his arms and fall.

"They've shot him!" gritted the young cattleman.

But not a moment did Chris hesitate. Leaping to window, he pulled Vincent into the room, and then sprang out upon the roof. One of the men had descended to the ground, but the other tried to shoot the cowboy before following.

Chris "ducked" just in time, and the bullet passed over his head. In another moment he had grappled with the desperado.

"So you are on the shoot!" gritted Chris. "You have dropped my friend, but I will avenge him!"

The man uttered a savage exclamation, and then began a desperate struggle on the slanting roof of the shed.

The cowboy soon discovered his opponent was a man of unusual strength and activity, but Chris Comstock had every nerve strained, and he was like a whirlwind in its fury.

The unknown desperado fought for his life, but he did not prove a match for Cowboy Chris. The cattleman broke his holds, grasped him in such a manner that he could not get away, then lifted him above his head.

"This for Conrad!" he cried, as he threw the ruffian from the roof.

Although panting from his exertions, he did not pause an instant, for he saw the kidnappers were mounting horses below. Just as he hurled the desperado from the roof he heard Round-up Rube crying:

"This way! this way! Hyer they be!"

Several men came running around the hotel, led by the bow-legged cattleman.

Chris did not pause for a ladder, but leaped from the roof to the ground, landing on his feet like a cat.

The pursuers were a few moments too late, for, just as Chris struck the ground, the kidnappers dashed away, paying no heed to those who cried out for them to stop or be shot.

The kidnapped girl freed her head from the muffling cloth, and her wild cries for help rung through the night, growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

"To horse! to horse!" shouted Chris, dashing toward the shed, closely followed by Rube and Old Blossom. "We must do our best to run the miscreants down!"

But, the kidnappers had secured a start, and the confusion prevented an immediate pursuit. Chris was first to leave the shed, but Rube and Old Blossom were not far behind.

"It's no good!" groaned the bow-legged cowboy, when he found the girl's cries could no longer be heard. "We can't foller them in ther dark! They hev got clean off!"

Nevertheless, a short pursuit was made. Chris was the first to halt.

"We must give it up," he said, grimly. "The best thing we can do is go back and hang that rascal, Boone."

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" burst from Old Blossom's lips. "Now you are shoutin'! We'll hang ther varmint ef we kin find him; but ef we want ter find him, we'd best git back thar mighty soon. 'Member he is Slippery Shane."

They rode back to the hotel as swiftly as possible, vengeance in their hearts. They found the place in an uproar, but Pascal Boone was gone.

"Dot veller took some sneaks," explained Hans. "I kept mein vedder eyes on him, und he shoost schlid out apoud as soon as possible after he got hit dot cracks mit Reupen's vist. Yaw, dot vas so."

"He has escaped us!" cried Chris. "We are foiled! I fear Conrad Vincent is lying dead in a room above. Follow me, and we will see how badly he is injured."

Chris secured a light and led the way up the stairs; but when the room was reached where he left Vincent, the young man was not there! There was no trace of blood to be found, and the supposed wounded man had vanished.

CHAPTER X.

BARRED OUT.

THREE weeks later.

On a cliff overlooking a wild mountain pocket, or basin that seemed walled in on every hand by barren bluffs, were the four trailers who had registered a solemn vow to run the Red Fox down. They all looked tired and dust-laden, for the death-hunt had already led them beyond the Great Colorado into the mountain region of Northwest Arizona. They found themselves in a wild section, concerning which the world at large knew very little.

The mountain had been hard to climb, and it was with great difficulty they had succeeded in getting their horses to the point overlooking the pocket; but, when that point was reached, to their amazement, they found themselves looking down on a small mining-town of twenty buildings. That such a place existed they had never dreamed.

The camp was built around a certain point where the uneven bottom of the pocket was most adapted for that purpose. One or two cabins stood remote from the others, the most pretentious of all being built against the face of a high bluff at a considerable distance from the other buildings.

Through the pocket dashed a small mountain stream that came tumbling down the rocks at one side and swept into a narrow cleft at the other. Near the point where the cabins were

thickest a number of sluices had been built, and there the four on the mountain saw a band of miners at work washing out gold after that primitive fashion.

It was plainly a placer town.

"Vell, py dunder und blitzens!" gasped Hans Krummacher, in great amazement. "Vill you look ad dot now! I pelieve dot vas some vil-lages, don'd id?"

"Ham fat!" cried Old Blossom. "Duz me ole eyes see straight, or is thet some meerarge? Is this yere an actual so-so, or am it some ante-delusion?"

"Who ever heard of a mining-town in this region?" asked Cowboy Chris.

"I hev," answered Rube; "but I never took no stock in it."

"An' so hev I, come to think o' it," asserted Old Blossom. "I've heerd mighty quare tales 'bout it, too; but I 'lowed they wuz like most o' ther yarns one hears 'bout sech things."

"It seems thar wuz some truth in 'em."

"Wa-al, I sh'ud serclaim!"

"And the trail of the Red Fox has led us here," came from the younger cowboy's lips. "What does that mean?"

"You tell."

"Can it mean we shall find him down there?"

"Mebbe so."

"Well, whether we find him there or not, he cannot be far away. We have run him near to his hole."

"Thet's right, Chris, lad," nodded Rube. "An' ef he tries ter hide in his hoel, we'll dig him out an' twist his tail, you bet!"

"If we only knew what became of Conrad Vincent I should feel better."

"Thet wuz er derved quare thing," confessed the bow-legged cattleman. "He disappeared 'thout leavin' a trace. Ef he wuz shot, why wuzn't thar any blood whar he fell? I tells ye I hev puzzled my ole noddle over thet some!"

"Jiggerin' jagers!" broke in Old Blossom. "I don't reckon it puzzled you more nor it has me. But w'at puzzled me ther most now is how ter git down inter this yere town. I don't see no way ter git thar."

The four surveyed the place closely, and for some time they were at a loss to understand how the pocket was entered. At length Chris's keen eyes detected a narrow fissure in the wall, and from this fissure a trail seemed to lead into the town.

"I reckon that is where the place is entered," he said, pointing it out to them. "It can't be much more than wide enough for a mounted man to ride through."

Another thorough inspection convinced them the young man had discovered the proper way of getting into the pocket.

"Thar's whar we'll hev ter travel ef we go in," said Rube.

"Unless we descend the bluff somewhere by means of our ropes," added Chris.

"Thet hain't practicable."

"Vell, I guess nod!" was the Dutch lad's emphatic remark. "V'at you took me vor, Reupen, some sailors? How you s'pose I vas goin' to gid dis corborosity uf mine down some ropes? I don'd vas nefer pelong to some circusses dot I rememper uf!"

"Wa-al, by gum! I thought ye wuz ther champion contortionist w'en ye got thet coal down yer back!" laughed Old Blossom. "You cut some o' ther most wonderful figgers I never saw."

"Und you laffed like some plamed vools! Vell, I don'd vorgid dot. Maype somedimes I haf der chance to laff ad you in der same vay, I gness."

"You will only hev ter laff in a natural manner."

"Dot vas all right! Berhabs you gits der petter uf Hans all der dimes, und den ergain berhabs you don'd."

"Listen!" commanded Chris.

Up from the pocket where the miners were at work floated the sound of many voices in song—a strange wild chorus that thrilled the listeners on the mountain-side. Although they could not understand the words, the air was like that of some carousal tune. The ring of many manly voices fairly awoke the echoes of the bluffs and crags.

"Say!" exclaimed Old Blossom, after they had listened a few minutes. "That soun's like a gang o' sailors h'istin' anchor. Somehow it gavs me er derved quare feelin'. I reckon we've struck er sing'ler town an' some sing'ler people."

"Ef this is ther town I've heerd ther stories erbout," said Rube, "you are right, Bloss."

"Well, I am for going down there," answered Chris.

The others were also inclined to visit the

strange camp, and they immediately discussed the best method of reaching the fissure which seemed to lead into the pocket. After a time, they decided on a course and started, Rube leading the way.

It was two hours later when they found themselves approaching the pocket by way of the narrow gorge Chris Comstock's keen eyes had discovered. As they had thought, it was necessary to ride in single file, and Old Rube was still at the head.

"We hev struck ther right trail," nodded the bow-legged cowboy. "Ther ground shows thet."

In truth, the ground beneath the feet of their horses showed it had been much traveled, a well-worn road leading along the gorge.

Onward they went till they fancied they must be near the pocket. Suddenly a turn in the gorge brought them face to face with an unexpected barrier.

Across the gorge was a massive gate of wood! "Waal, I'll be derved!" cried Round-up Rube, drawing rein.

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' old Noah!" gasped Old Blossom.

"Dunder and blitzens!" gurgled Hans.

"We seem to be barred out," observed Chris.

"Waal, I sh'ud say so, by gum! I'm jim-figgered ef this don't knock me! Reckon this yere's er reg'ler toll-gate! Don't cal'late they knowed ther 'riginal an' only posy blossom o' ther peraries wur comin' ter call on 'em! Don't 'low they wuz s'pectin' er visit from ther sweetes-scented mountain violet o' ther wild lan's! Wow! This is strange, stranger, strangest, an' every one begins with er capital S."

"Wonder how we kin rouse ther people beyond this yere gate?" said Rube.

"Let's holler."

At a signal they all lifted their voices in unison and made the gorge ring with their shout.

"That ought to start them," remarked Chris.

But, although they waited a long time for some one to appear, it finally became plain their cry had not aroused any one beyond the gate.

"Dern it all!" growled the bow-legged cowboy. "W'at be we goin' ter do?"

"Wouldn't it be a good plan to try the gate?" suggested Chris. "We do not even know for sure it is fastened."

"Thet's er fac!" grunted Old Blossom. "W'at derved fools we be! Ef it hain't fastened, we'd oughter go shoot ourselves!"

But when Rube dismounted and tried it, they saw it was indeed secure.

"Hanged ef I don't roust somebody!" declared the veteran cattleman.

With that he jerked out his revolver and began firing in the air. The others followed his example, and a perfect fusilade of shots were discharged.

"They're all deaf ef thet don't bring 'em," averred Old Blossom.

Ten minutes passed.

"Then I reckon they're all deaf," grumbled Rube. "I'd like ter know how we're goin' ter start 'em!"

Suddenly Chris's eyes caught sight of a rope that was dangling beside the wall at one side of the gate.

"I reckon that is a bell-cord," he decided. "Pull it, pard, and we will soon find out."

"Ef thar's er bell hitched ter t'other eend o' this, I'll yank ther tongue out!" cried Rube, as he gave a powerful surge on the rope.

CHAPTER XI.

ADDLE-PATE ABE.

THE sound of a bell did not reach their ears, but almost immediately a square section in the heavy door flew open, and a hairy, hideous face appeared.

The Death Hunt Pard was both amused and astonished.

"Ham fat an' fried liver!" exclaimed Old Blossom. "Ye hev 'rousted Cerberus, sure, Pard Rube!"

A pair of fiery eyes gleamed from the repulsive face, the lips behind the hairy mask moved, but only an unintelligible medley of sounds issued from them.

"Shimminy cracious!" cried Hans. "V'at kindt uf languages vas dot he vas sayin', I don'd under-stand! I pelief dot vas some mixtures uf Ladin und Kickapoo, don'd id?"

"Hello, Mister Ogre!" saluted Rube. "We want ter come in."

The creature beyond the gate lifted his hands in front of his face and made some strange signs.

"I wonder w'at thet means?" queried the bow-legged cowboy. "Can't he talk?"

"It doesn't look like it," answered Chris.

"Say, you feller," and Rube turned to the

man beyond the gate: "We want ter come inter the sanctum-sanctorum."

"In other words, ter s'press it more elegantly," bowed Old Blossom, "we'd like ter shassay erlong, but this yere obstruction obstructs us."

The man at the opening did not speak, but made more signs.

"You are wasting your breath on him," declared Chris. "He is deaf-and-dumb."

"Waal, I sw'ar!" growled Rube. "Thet's er purty guard ter hev fer sech er place!"

"How be we goin' ter make him understand?" inquired the tall nomad.

"I will try it," said the younger cowboy. "I used to know the deaf-and-dumb alphabet."

He dismounted and came forward, making some signs to the man. A few signals were exchanged, then the mute closed the opening in the gate very suddenly.

"Waal," drawled Old Blossom, "how did ye make out?"

"I could understand him quite well. He has gone for somebody that can talk."

"I hope they won't keep us waitin' hyer all day, fer I'm gittin' hongry."

At least thirty minutes passed before the section in the gate was again opened, and then the muzzle of a rifle was thrust out, while another face appeared and a pair of keen eyes peered along the barrel.

"Hello, out thar!"

"Hello, yerself!" retorted Rube.

"W'at der you fellers want?"

"Ter come in."

"Wal, I 'low want'll be yer master."

"You won't let us in?"

"Nixey."

"W'y not?"

"You don't b'long hyer."

"But we've come er long distance, an' we are derved hongry an' tired."

"I can't help that."

"You don't really mean ter keep us out?"

"Don't I?"

"You can't!"

"Wal, thar's whar ye fools yerself."

"Why won't ye let us in?"

"I tole ye 'cause ye don't b'long hyer."

"Thet hain't no good reason."

"Wal, it goes."

"W'at kinder derved place hev ye got thet ye don't let people inter?"

"Thet hain't any of your business."

"Wal, I reckon we know, fer we saw ther camp from ther side o' ther mountain. Keepin' us out won't keep us from goin' an' tellin'."

The bow-legged cowboy saw an evil light leap into the eyes that gleamed along the barrel.

"I s'pose ye means thet fer er threat," said the man beyond the gate. "Wal, I don't keer fer thet. My advice ter you is ter slide out of this afore ye git salted fer keeps."

Rube suddenly lost his temper.

"Dad-burn yer ole town!" he cried. "We will git inter it yit! This yere's er free kentry, an' you'll find ye hev bucked erg'in' ther wrong gang w'en ye struck us!"

"Thar, thar! thet'll do!" growled the man with the rifle. "Git!"

"Will ye open ther gate?"

"Git!"

"Thar's more'n one way ter skin er cat an'—"

"Git!"

"We'll find er way ter—"

"Git!"

"Go ter blazes! You'd make er good par-rot!"

"GIT!"

A double click told our friends the time had come to obey, for the man really intended to open fire if they did not. Rube reluctantly mounted his horse.

"By-by, partner!" he called, waving his hand at the man beyond the gate. "See ye later!"

For some distance the four rode onward without uttering a word. Chris was the first to speak.

"As that was a failure, we shall have to find some other way of getting into the pocket."

"But, kin we find another way?" asked Rube.

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah, yes!" blurted Old Blossom. "We'll find er way ef we hev ter go down by balloon—yes we will, pards."

"I'd vas some cold day v'en dot banzy plossoms gifes anydings ub," observed Hans.

The four avengers were baffled for the time, but they were not beaten. The opposition only made them all the more determined to enter the guarded mining-camp.

From the narrow gorge they once more turned to the upward slopes, again climbing the mountain.

Suddenly, as they were riding slowly along,

they were startled by a wild burst of laughter that seemed to come from above their heads. Looking upward, they beheld a strange figure standing on a point of rock twenty feet above.

A man attired in rags and carrying a long-barreled rifle, on which he leaned. The ragged garments failed to conceal the fact that his body was terribly twisted and deformed and his arms seemed like crooked sticks. There was an old slouch hat on his head, and his face was a strange spotted color, as if it had been blown full of powder. But his eyes were what caught the observer's attention at first glance. They were red as coals and seemed to pierce one through at a look.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the strange individual, glaring down on the startled persons below. "You found the barred gate! They would not let you in! No, no, no! Ha, ha, ha! I could have told ye—yes, I could!"

"Holy smoke!" gasped Round-up Rube. "Who be you?"

"Who am I? Ha, ha, ha! Don't you know? Why, you ought to know!"

"Waal, I'm durned ef I do!"

The strange man pressed one hand to his head as if trying to think.

"Who am I? who am I?" he kept repeating. "Sometimes I think I know who I am, and then—

—and then— Am I the devil?"

"Ach, himmel!" exclaimed Hans. "I guesses dot vos apoud der sizes uf him!"

"No, no, no! I am—I have forgotten. I know what they call me now. It is Abe—Addle-pate Abe. They say I am mad, but the fools lie! Mad! Ha, ha, ha! Why, I know more than the best of them! Does that seem like a madman?"

As he received no reply, he slid down from the point of rock, clung to the wall like a leech and swung himself to the ground in front of the four avengers. There he crouched in a posture which seemed to indicate he was about to spring, while his red eyes roved swiftly from face to face, and his hideous countenance worked strangely.

"Durned ef you hain't ernough ter skeer anything, pard!" exclaimed Round-up Rube, attempting to quiet his startled horse.

At this the wild man once more broke out laughing.

"I am not handsome," he confessed. "No, no, no! Look at these arms—these legs! Look at this bunch on my back! Look how this hip is knocked in and this one is knocked out! Look at my face!"

He did not need tell them to look. He was so horrible in appearance that he seemed to exert a fascination on them and they could not avoid looking.

"I was not always this way," he went on. "I can't seem to remember, but I know I was once straight and handsome like any man. Something made me thus! something made me Addle-pate Abe! What was it?"

"You look like ye hed bin blowed up in er powder-mill s'plosion, pard."

"Ha! Blown up! That was it! I was blown up! And he—curse him!—that devil did it!"

"Who?"

"The Red Fox!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAILERS OBTAIN SOME INFORMATION.

THE madman's final words filled those who heard them with amazement. So, here was another enemy of the Red Fox—a man who had been disfigured for life by the demon outlaw!

"The Red Fox?" came eagerly from Chris Comstock's lips. "What do you know of him?"

"Know! Ha! I know enough! I was one of his band—I was trusted! I remember it now, but it goes from me at times. There will be times when I cannot recall the past. Now it comes to me."

"If you are one of his band, you can describe him?"

"I can—oh, yes, I can! And that is why I look like this! His face—he kept it hidden. Even his trusted men saw it not. He wore a mask. I was curious—I wanted to see the face behind that mask. There was a chamber where none of the men were admitted—Red Fox's private room. There he slept. I went there when he slumbered, and I looked on his face. He awoke and saw me! Ah! curse him! he saw me!"

The crazy creature smote his head with his hand, and his powder-blistered face worked convulsively. Rage, terror, and hatred were expressed by his looks.

"I had looked on his face, so I was doomed! He swore I should be blown into fragments! To a dismal cavern I was dragged. There they

fastened me down and left me by a keg of powder, into which was thrust a lighted fuse! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, the fiends! I have not forgotten—no, no, no! Oh, the horror of it! How I suffered! how I screamed! how I prayed!"

"An' you wuz blowed up?" breathlessly asked Rube.

"I suppose so. I know nothing about it. My senses had left me when it came. Next that I knew I was in the wigwam of an old Indian doctor. He had found me and brought me back to life. Look at me! This is what I became because I dared look on the face of a human being! Is it strange I am sometimes confused and cannot remember? I am not mad—I am never mad! No, no, no! All my trouble is that I cannot remember. I would have killed him long ago if I could have remembered; but just when I am ready to strike I forget—I forget."

"If you have seen the face of the Red Fox, you ought to know what he looks like."

"I do. He is a half-breed Indian. His jaws are square, his cheek-bones high, his eyes black as midnight. His nose has been broken, and a livid scar runs from his left temple to the corner of his mouth. I am not handsome—oh, no!—but about his face there is something that makes him more repulsive than I."

"Cott in himmel!" muttered Hans. "I don't feel dot vas possible!"

The manner of the disfigured creature was a little strange just then, but he did not seem like the madman his first talk had led them to believe.

"You are hunting for the Red Fox?" he questioned, and seeing an acknowledgment in Rube's eyes, he went on: "You have a difficult task to find him. He is sly and crafty, like the animal from which he is named. Did you hope to find him in Lost Placer?"

"Lost Placer?"

"Yes, the town down in the pocket."

"Waal, we hev trailed him to these yere parts."

"Then it may be he has returned."

"Returned?"

"He has a den in these parts somewhere, though I have been unable to find it. On his raids he goes away for many weeks or months."

"Well, what kind of a place is Lost Placer?" inquired Chris.

"You have seen it, for I saw you looking upon it from the mountain-side. There I am not harmed, for they fear me. I enter and leave the place, and they know not how I do it. I have a way—a secret way."

"Ham fat!" exclaimed Old Blossom. "Then you're ther very man we're lookin' fer."

"That is true," bowed Chris. "We wish to enter the town in some way."

"You would be in danger there."

"That does not count."

"You would be watched and killed, or forced to the Brandons or the Strangers."

"The Brandons or the Strangers?"

"Yes. I see you do not understand. Listen. Two men, Basil Brandon and Norman Strange, claim to be the original discoverers of the placer where the town stands, and both deny the other's right. Both men have their followers, and at first there were some desperate battles between them; but they soon saw their folly and settled down by dividing the territory, each taking a certain portion of the pocket for himself and his men. It has since developed that Strange was the most fortunate in the division, and Brandon's men are dissatisfied. There is certain to be more trouble between the two clans sooner or later."

"And are both parties opposed to admitting strangers to the pocket?"

"Yes; they are united on that point."

"Well, we have decided to go in there at any cost. Will you aid us?"

Addle-pate Abe, as the disfigured had designated himself, leaned on his long rifle and bowed his head on his hand, as if in thought. Several moments of silence followed, then he spoke:

"Yes, I believe I will aid you; but in return I ask you to assist me in getting revenge on the Red Fox. There is a strange jumble in my head. Sometimes it seems as if I had already killed the Red Fox, but I fear I am mistaken."

"You are; the fiend still lives to do his evil work."

"Then his life is mine! Ha, ha, ha! His life is mine! Look at me. Do I not have first claim on him? I will kill the one who dares rob me of my revenge! By this hand the Red Fox must die."

Above his head he held his powder-marked right hand, and once more his face was working with the fury that made him a madman.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MADMAN'S HOME.

COWBOY CHRIS dismounted and approached the side of the deranged, speaking in a calm and soothing manner. There was a strange charm about the younger cowboy's words and presence, for Addle-pate Abe instantly became quieter and soon seemed like anything but a crazy person.

"Now," said Chris, "we are ready to follow you. Show us where we can conceal our horses."

"Yes, yes; come with me. I know where they will not be found, and they can feed and drink."

"That's ther place we're lookin' fer," nodded Rube.

Abe led the way, and they followed. For more than an hour he led them onward and upward. Finally, by means of a narrow pass, they entered a small circular valley high up among the mountains.

"There," said the deranged, "here is feed and water for your horses, for there is a spring over in the shade of those pines. You can turn them loose, and we will prevent them from escaping by placing some timbers across the pass by which we have just entered."

"Is there no other way by which they can get out?" asked Chris.

"There is none."

Being thus assured, our friends quickly unsaddled their horses and removed the light burden from the pack-animal. Abe showed them where they could conceal their accouterments in a cleft beneath an overhanging rock, covering all with dead branches, so only the skillful eyes of an Indian would detect their hiding-place.

When this was done they followed the deranged from the valley, and two fallen trees were placed across the narrow pass in such a manner that it would be impossible for the horses to leave without human aid.

"There is a long tramp before you," asserted Abe. "The sun will be down before we reach the cave."

"Vell, py dunder, dot vas von hard von on me!" exclaimed Hans. "Bud I pets you your life I hellup out der cravings uf mein inner mans mit der shabe uf dis."

And then they saw he had secured some dried meat from the pack and was eating it as fast as possible.

The Dutch lad was given a hard pull before the entrance to Abe's cavern home was reached. The shadows of early evening were gathering when they halted before a perpendicular bluff that loomed above their heads. At the base of the bluff was a mass of scrubby bushes.

"If we were up there," said Addle-pate Abe, motioning toward the top of the bluff, "we might look down on Lost Placer."

This was the first intimation they had received that they were so near the strange camp of the inaccessible pocket.

Abe stooped and parted the bushes, saying:

"Follow me."

On his hands and knees he crept in and disappeared, pushing his long rifle in front of him. Chris followed, then Rube and Old Blossom, Hans bringing up the rear. They soon found themselves in a narrow hole that led slowly downward into the earth, and for some time they were obliged to proceed on their hands and knees. For Hans this was difficult, and at times the Dutch lad could scarcely squeeze his body through.

After a while the passage grew larger, and finally they were able to stand erect. Then, at a word from Abe, they halted.

"Keep still and I will strike a light," spoke the deranged, his voice sounding hollow and unearthly in the underground passage.

In a short time he had done so, lighting a torch which showed them their surroundings. The passage was still small, but the light revealed the fact that it grew larger further on.

Abe advanced once more, and the others followed. In a short time they came into a chamber that was plainly the living or sleeping apartment of the strange man of the mountains. There were skins on the floor and walls, and a broad stone served as a table. In one corner was a pile of wood, and there was a sort of natural fire-place near by. Abe explained that the smoke passed away by a natural chimney to reach the open air at some unknown point.

The hermit produced food, and the entire party ate, seated on the skins which covered the rocky floor.

"From this cave I can descend directly into the pocket where stands Lost Placer Camp," asserted the deformed.

"We wish to enter that place as soon as possible," declared Chris.

"You shall do so to-night. The darkness will cover our movements."

When their hunger and thirst had been satisfied, Addle-pate Abe arose and announced himself ready to show them how the town was reached.

"Leave your rifles here," he advised. "You will not need them."

Lighting another torch, he led the way from the chamber, and they soon found themselves slowly descending some rude steps which had apparently been fashioned by the hand of man.

"This is my work," explained the cave-dweller. "It took me two years to finish them and the door you shall see."

Down, down they went, the passage winding, here and there. Finally, their guide announced the bottom was reached, and directly they found themselves confronted by a wall of stone which appeared to bar further progress.

"We have reached the door," asserted Abe; but they looked in vain for a door. "You cannot see it! Well, it is not apparent from the outer side. I was obliged to spend many long days of work upon it, but it serves my purpose fully. I shall not be able to show you how it works, for I must extinguish my torch before it is opened. The light would betray us."

He put out the torch, and in a few moments they heard a slight grating sound. This was followed by a breath of cool air, and then the strange man of the mountains whispered:

"Come this way."

They advanced to his side and found themselves looking out through a large square opening. Below them twinkled the lights of the Lost Placer.

"There is the town you wish to enter," hissed Addle-pate Abe. "The Red Fox may be down there! Who knows? Ha, ha, ha! If he is—if he is—I have waited long—long! My hour shall come, then woe, woe, woe to the fiend who made me the monster I am!"

In a moment he had grown excited; his calmness had vanished as the fierce longing for revenge sent the hot blood throbbing through his veins.

CHAPTER XIV.

TROUBLE BREWING IN LOST PLACER.

THE madman's companions feared he might betray them in his excitement, and Chris hastened to soothe him with low-spoken words. In the darkness Addle-pate Abe passed a hand over his forehead, as if brushing away unpleasant thoughts.

"I am all right," he assured. "It was only for a moment. Do not fear; I know enough not to attract the attention of the men of Lost Placer."

"How are we to get down there?" asked Chris.

"I have a way," and Abe felt around in the darkness till his hands touched what he sought. "Here is a rope-ladder I constructed for that purpose."

In a few moments the ladder was attached and ready to be dropped.

"Now," spoke the bow-legged cattleman, "we mus' hev some plans afore we drap down thar."

"Ham fat an' sizzled sassage, yes!" agreed Old Blossom.

"Dunder und blitzens!" gurgled Hans. "You vellers don'd mean to say you vas goin' to tumble all dot distance, ain't id?"

"We are going down by the rope," explained Chris.

"Vell, I pets me your shirt Hans Krummacher don'd do nottings like dot. Id vas goin' to took some mighty strong ropes to holt this poys. I pelief I hat petter nod dry to pe some sailors."

This pleased Chris, who had feared for the good judgment and caution of the Dutch lad, and he quickly said:

"All right, Hans; you may stay here. You can render us valuable assistance, for you can pull up the rope-ladder so it will stand no chance of being discovered by those below. Then, when we want to come up, you can lower it for us."

"Yaw, I pelief I vas aple to do dot."

The others saw the wisdom of leaving the Dutch lad behind, for he would be of very little value as a fighter, if it became necessary to fight.

"We mus' hev some kind o'er signal fer him," said Rube. "Ef we don't, he won't know w'en ter lower ther ladder."

"Three whistles like this will be enough," and Chris gave a low signal.

This was agreed upon, and then Abe lowered the ladder. He went down first, and the others followed one by one until all had reached the bottom of the pocket. Then the signal was given for Hans to draw up the ladder.

"Follow me," whispered the cave-dweller.

They did so, and he led them to a mass of boulders, where they all crouched in the darkness. Just as they reached this cover, a burst of song came from the distant cabin against the face of the bluff.

"Holy smoke!" muttered Round-up Rube. "Them fellers seem ter be makin' merry!"

Addle-pate Abe listened curiously.

"I don't just understand that," he declared. "Never before have I heard them sing at that place. They are usually rather quiet."

"What kind of a place is it?" asked the younger cowboy.

"The headquarters of the Brandons. I have always held a suspicion it was built against that wall for a purpose—possibly to conceal the mouth of a cave, or something of that kind."

"Well, those fellows certainly seem in a merry mood."

"Appearances are often deceptive. There is a sound about that singing I do not like. Those men are not drunk, and, unless they were intoxicated, they would not be howling like that for nothing."

"Then you think—just what?"

"I confess I don't know what to think. It is—"

"Sh!"

Old Blossom gave a warning hiss.

"Two critters comin' this yere way!" whispered Rube, his eyes peering through the darkness toward the point where the long-legged nomad's attention seemed attracted. "Lay mighty low, ev'ry man!"

They all crept into the deeper darkness at the base of the rocks, and there they lay, clutching their weapons, waiting for whatever might follow.

Two men were truly approaching the rocks, and, of course, they were two of the regular dwellers in Lost Placer Camp. They were conversing in low tones.

"We'll hev ter jump 'em ef they see us!" hissed Rube; "an' thar kan't be no squarmishness 'bout it. Ev'ry man redy fer biz!"

But, by rare good fortune the two passed without seeing the crouching figures by the rocks. However, they halted a short distance further on, and there they stood, conversing in a guarded manner.

Rube uttered a smothered curse, but held himself in check, for he had noticed something strange about the two men as they passed.

Their faces were concealed by masks!

In the darkness Addle-pate Abe's eyes glowed like coals of fire.

As the four venturesome men could not leave the vicinity without being discovered they remained quiet and listened to the talk of the two. It was not long before they found themselves intensely interested.

"Ther time hes come," said one of the men.

"Yes," agreed the other, "ther cap'n's goin' ter strike ter-night."

"Thar'll be hot times 'round hyer afore mornin'."

"Now ye're shoutin'!"

"Somebody's goin' ter git killed."

"Shore."

"It's apt ter be you ur I, Hi."

"I know that."

"What be we gittin' fer settin' our lives up in this yar way?"

"Mighty little."

"Right you be! Ther cap'n jest uses us as his tools."

"But we're in fer it now."

"It looks thet way."

"W'at fer duz ther cap'n want us ter all wear masks ter-night, kin you tell?"

"Nop; not unless he has some cranky nosun 'bout not lettin' ther Strangers see our faces."

"Waal, ther Strangers know ther hull of us, so w'at's ther good of maskin'?"

"You tell."

"I won't."

"Ner I."

For a moment the two were silent, and Rube improved the time to whisper in Chris Comstock's ear:

"Goin' ter be er rucshun, lad! Ther critters are goin' ter fightin' 'mongst themselves!"

Chris did not whisper any word in return, but he gave the old cattleman's hand a pressure that told Rube he was heard and understood. The two men in masks began talking again.

"Ther cap'n thinks ole Strangers spects su'thin' crooked, an' he says Strange will jump him ef

he don't make ther fu'st jump. Thet's w'y he's goin' ter git in his work ter-night, I s'pose."

"I reckon so."

"W'at d'yer think of ther new man?"

"Iron Ben?"

"Yep."

"I dunno. He seems ther right sort."

"Wal, ye know he hes er mighty hefty reppy-tashun as er fu'st-class hoss-lifter?"

"I've heerd so."

"An' he kem well recommended."

"Shore. Spot-eye Smith's word is safe ter 'pend on."

"Wal, he'll be one more fool ter git killed fer ther cap'n."

It was plain the two were in no very agreeable frame of mind toward their chief.

Again Old Blossom detected some one approaching.

"Holy ham fat thet scorched ther gullet o' ole Noah!" he gasped. "I reckon ther bull blamed congregatherin' 's goin' ter collect hyerabouts!"

Not one of the four dared change his position, so they all lay still and trusted to good fortune and the darkness to keep them from detection.

It proved [two more men were approaching, and they passed so close the bow-legged cowboy could almost have put out his right hand and touched the legs of the one nearest. He turned his head sufficiently to look up at them, and he saw they both wore masks.

But, what caused a thrill to run over his body, was the fact that from the hat of one rose a white plume-like feather that could be dimly seen bobbing in the darkness.

The man was White Plume, lieutenant of the Red Fox's band!

The two were talking, and the lieutenant said:

"You are the very man we need, Iron Ben. We want somebody with the men as one of them who does not care for man or devil."

The other asserted, in a hoarse, growling tone:

"Thet's me, pard, bet yer boots! I've never seen ther livin' varmint yit as I wuz skeerd of, an', ef I do say it as sh'u'dn't, I'm er mighty tough man ter git erway with. I hev scrapped it with ther best of 'em, an' they hev allus went under. Ther Sheriff of Tombstun confesses I am ther wu'st human critter he ever 'tempted ter 'rest. An' 'sides bein' er b-a-a-d man ter tackle, I'm er powerful hard horse ter hold. Slippery Shane's called mighty oily, but I will acknowledge I'm a more deeficult galoot ter keep yer paws on. Ther Marshal of Gila Bar swore I wuz nuthin' but er derved braggin' skunk thet didn't 'mount ter nuthin' nobow, an' I jest went down ter see him w'en I heerd of it. W'en I wuz done with him, they hed ter gather him up on er hankerfist, an' thar wuzn't enough ter kiver a common female's nose-wipe. Then thar's— Hello!"

White Plume and his companion of the boastful inclination came upon the two fellows who first halted by the rocks, and they likewise paused. A conversation between the four followed, and the greater part of it was overheard by four more men who were concealed in the deeper darkness at the base of the rocks. In this manner our friends became acquainted with the plans of the Brandons.

The attack on the Strangers was to be made near the hour of midnight, and the signal was to be six pistol-shots fired in rapid succession. The Brandons hoped to overcome their foes before the latter gained an inkling of the plot against them.

Their reasons for wearing masks seemed to be that they wished to keep their faces concealed from the Strangers. In case they failed to come off victors, Basil Brandon was going to deny having any hand in the plot and swear he knew not who among his men were concerned in it. Of course this would be a shallow pretense, but by pure cheek he might luff it through.

However, the Brandons did not mean to fail.

Their plans were carefully laid and success seemed assured. It was resolved that Norman Strange and certain of his men must die, but others of the Strangers who, when victory for the Brandons was assured, should swear loyalty to their new master should be spared.

The principal point of attack was to be the Neutral Ground Saloon, where each night the two factions met as friends. The Brandons were to keep up such an excitement at the saloon that near midnight the greater part of the Strangers would be attracted there. Then the signal would be given and the masked men would descend on the unsuspecting Strangers.

Iron Ben was to have charge of the Brandons

in the saloon, although they were to appear doubtful as to his square intentions and were to asseverate he had gained admittance to the pocket in some manner unknown to them. It seemed, in truth, he had not entered by the regular way, but by a way known only to the Brandons.

As Chris listened to these plans he was filled with satisfaction, for he saw in the coming struggle a chance for himself and companions to carry out their intentions and get their hands on the Red Fox.

How?

Within his mind the young cowboy had arrived at a decision. Basil Brandon was none other than the Red Fox himself! This was settled beyond a doubt as far as he was concerned. This being true, it would not be a difficult thing to warn Norman Strange of his impending peril and have the tables turned on Brandon and his men.

These thoughts passed swiftly through the young cattleman's head, but he had no opportunity to communicate them to his companions just then. However, there was time enough, and he did not grow impatient.

For twenty minutes or more the four plotters remained within hearing of the Death Hunt Pard, and during that time Iron Ben did a large amount of boasting. More than once Round-up Rube found it difficult to repress a snort of disgust as the horse-thief bragged of his lawless feats. It was strange that White Plume was not disgusted with the fellow, but Iron Ben's reputation seemed enough to make him popular among his new-found comrades.

At length White Plume and Iron Ben departed, and the two Brandons who first came to the rocks were left there. They waited until the lieutenant and the horse-thief were beyond hearing, then both broke into scornful laughs. One said:

"I've heard tell Iron Ben wuz inclined ter boast, but derned ef he don't take ther cake!"

"Ye'r' right, pard," agreed the other. "He jest erbout makes me sick."

"But they say he's er powerful fighter."

"Wal, he oughter be!"

"Ther cap'n needs fighters ter-night ef he's goin' ter git erway with Norman Strange."

"You bet!"

"I say, pard."

"Wal?"

"I don't fancy this yer' business."

"No more do I."

"W'at be we goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"You say."

There were a few moments of silence, then the two went on again.

"Thar is er way ter git out, pard."

"Ef you know one, you're erhead of me."

"Wal, I do."

"How?"

"Take French leave."

"I never took ye fer no dern fool, Hi!"

"Thankee, Ike, thankee."

"But I dunno but ye be."

"W'at?"

"Thet's w'at I said."

"W'at d'yer mean?"

"Jest thet. You tork 'bout takin' French leave, but you oughter know it can't be did."

"I hain't so dern sure of thet."

"If so, how so?"

"Thar oughter be some s'cuze thet'd let us out."

"Thar mought be at some other time, but ther cap'n'd smell er mice in er minute jest now. To be course you mean ter go out by ther passage under ther fall? You can't think of passin' Deef Dan?"

"It w'u'dn't make er dern bit er difference ter me how we got out, so long as we done it."

"But arter we wuz out—w'at?"

"Thet's ther w'u'st of it. We'd be er blamed long distance frum nowhar, an' we w'u'dn't hev any bosses ter take us thar."

Once more the men became silent, as if in a dejected mood. Plainly they were cowards as well as rascals, and they did not relish the idea of risking their lives in the conflict that was impending.

Chris Comstock crept close to Round-up Rube and placed his lips at the old cattleman's ear, whispering:

"We must capture these two toughs. They can tell us much that is of importance, and their clothes and masks will be of service to us, perhaps. What say you?"

Rube answered:

"Right, lad! We must jump 'em. You tell Ole Posy an' I'll speak ter Abel."

This was done. Then, at a signal from Rube, they all began creeping toward the two unsus-

pecting men. Little dreaming of what was to follow, the two men began talking once more.

"It's er dern little ther cap'n keers fer us so long as he feathers his own nest."

"Thet's right. He keeps us hyer workin' like dogs, w'ile he an' some of his picked pards go off on their raids. Neither you ur I hev ever bin selected fer any of them expeditions."

"Wal, Ike, ef we git through ter-night, I'm fer gittin' out jest as soon as we kin."

"You know ther cap'n hes er bad reppytation an' we am sworn ter stan' by him."

"I knows thet, but we'll putt er powerful long distance atween him an' us. He'll hev suthin' ter do 'sides ketchin' us, an' we'll be fur erway 'fore he gits started."

"I wish ther road wuz open now."

"So do I."

"Say."

"Wal?"

"Thar's Norman Strange."

"W'at of him?"

"How much d'yer s'pose he'd give ter know of ther plans erg'in' him?"

"Sh! Dern it, man, ye're crazy ter think of thet! Ef we deserted, we might git so fur erway ther cap'n'd never lay han's on us; but ef we turned traitors, he'd hev our lives ur bu'st."

A moment of silence followed this statement, and Cowboy Chris prepared to show himself. He waited till one of the men turned fairly from him, then he arose, and the others followed his example.

"Thar's no gittin' out of it now, Hi," dejectedly asserted the fellow addressed as Ike. "We're in fer it—"

Chris leaped forward and placed a cocked revolver at the man's ear, hissing:

"Silence! You are in for it! If either makes a cry, you are both dead men!"

CHAPTER XV.

DARING PLANS.

At the same instant Round-up Rube had thrust a cocked revolver under the nose of the other man, and he added:

"Straight goods, pards; but ef ye keeps still, ye won't be hurted a tall."

At first the two men had been so startled they did not utter a sound, and when they recovered, they saw they were outnumbered two to one. Then fear kept their tongues quiet.

"Everything will be all right if you do not raise a row," assured Cowboy Chris. "We do not intend to harm you, but we mean to give you the very chance you are looking for—to get clear of Basil Brandon."

"Ham fat an' sizzled sassage!" chuckled Old Blossom, surveying the outlaw under whose nose Rube had thrust his revolver. "This feller is 'bout my size. Great jizzillin' bug-juice! but hain't thet er quare sight!" and the old fellow had hard work to keep from shouting with merriment as he gazed at Rube and his captive.

Addle-pate Abe did not utter a word.

"We overheard all that passed between you two," asserted Chris; "and we have decided to give you an opportunity to get clear of your present master."

"Who be you?" asked one of the men.

"Shore ye hain't none of the Strangers!"

"Right you be, pard," nodded Rube. "We're runnin' on our own hooks."

"How did you git in hyer?"

"Now don't go fer ter be axin' too menny questions. You'll find thet out soon enough."

"We are here for business," asserted Chris; "and we are not men o' fool with. A human life amounts to nothing if it stands in the way of our success, so beware what you do. If you submit quietly, you shall not be harmed, and we will get you out of Brandon's clutches."

"How ye goin' ter do thet?"

"You have been cautioned not to ask too many questions. If you trust to as, you will be all right."

"W'at ye want us ter do?"

"Follow our directions, and remember you are in constant danger of death if you do anything to give your former comrades a warning."

"An' you'll git us out of hyer?"

"Yes. You will not have to take a hand in the struggle that is sure to occur to-night. To-morrow you may be far from this place."

"Be you officers?"

"No."

"Shore?"

"Sure."

"An' ye won't turn us over ter ther Viggy-lants?"

"You will be free men to-morrow."

"Then we're reddy ter go with ye. Eh, Hi?"

"I reckon, Ike."

No time was lost by our friends. When the fellows had expressed their willingness to go along peaceably, they were at once escorted toward the point where the cave could be reached by the rope ladder. Three soft whistles in quick succession brought the ladder tumbling down the rocks, which showed Hans was wide awake and on the lookout.

"You go up first, Rube," said Chris, "and be ready to receive these men when they arrive."

Rube quickly mounted the ladder.

"Now," and the younger cowboy turned to one of the masked men, "you are to follow. Remember you are between two fires and will be riddled with bullets if you raise an outcry. Have a little judgment and you will be all right."

The fellow hesitated a moment, but on being again assured he should be a free man with the coming of another day, he slowly ascended the ladder and disappeared through the opening that led into the cave.

Old Blossom followed, and then nearly five minutes passed before the signal was given for the next man to come up. After the second Brandon had disappeared, Chris also mounted the ladder, leaving Addle-pate Abe at the bottom. Once within the cave, they found a way to close the craftily devised door. Then a torch was lighted.

Already had the mask and coat been removed from the first of the Brandons to mount the ladder, and the fellow's hands and feet were secured.

The other was instructed to also remove his coat and mask, a thing which he reluctantly did. Then he was also bound securely.

"This is simply a precaution that is necessary for our own safety," explained Chris. "When our plans have been carried out, you shall be released."

"Mein cootness!" exclaimed Hans. "You don't vas goin' to capture all 'does beebles down there, I reliefs?"

"Not quite that."

Then Chris, Rube and Old Blossom sat down on the ground and discussed various plans. Finally, the younger cowboy said:

"We have not questioned these fellows. It is possible they can tell us much that will be to our advantage."

He turned toward the two captives.

"See here; whatever you tell us about Basil Brandon and his men will be to your advantage, providing you tell the truth."

"W'at yer wan' ter know?" demanded the shorter of the two.

"First, is Basil Brandon, Red Fox, the outlaw?"

"Wal, thar ye hev got us, pard. Ye see, we wuzn't never trusted like some of ther men, but we hev 'lowed he wuz ther Red Fox. Anyhow, White Plume is trusted by ther cap'n, an' he is ther Red Fox's lieutenant."

"Brandon has been away of late?"

"Yep."

"Just returned?"

"Yep."

"Did he bring a captive with him?"

"I dunno 'bout thet. Hi an' I wuz never let go through ther cave."

"The cave?"

"Yep."

"Where is that?"

"Back of ther Cliff Cabin."

"Then that building against the bluff conceals the mouth of a cave?"

"Shore."

"I thought as much. To what use is the cave put?"

"Thar's er way ter git in an' out by goin' through it."

"Ah!"

"It leads down inter ther canyon through which ther crick runs. Down thar is er puppen-dicler fall of water, an' thar hain't no way ter git up ur down ther canyon past thet fall."

"Then of what use is the cave?"

"Wal, ye see it opens under ther fall, an' w'en ye comes out through ther watter ye are below ther impassable point. Then all ye hev ter do is wade down ther crick tell ye comes ter ther Devil's Corkscrew. By thet ye kin leave ther canyon."

"And the Strangers know nuthin' o' this?" asked Rube.

"Nary thing."

The two cow boys exchanged glances, and Rube said:

"Chris, lad, I 'lows we hev run ther Red Fox ter his boel!"

"It looks that way," agreed Chris. "And now comes the job of rounding him up."

"We kin do it, boy."

Chris continued to question the two captives till he could obtain no further information of importance from them.

"Now," said he, turning to Old Blossom and Rube, "here are disguises for you two," and he held up the masks and coats worn by the two Brandons. "One of these fellows is tall and the other short, so you will be well fitted. The tall one is Ill, and the short one Ike. Thus disguised, you may escape detection and be able to learn more of the Brandons' plans."

"And you?" asked Rube.

"I will have to go it as I am."

So Rube and Old Blossom donned the coats, hats and masks of the two captives.

"Hain fat an' tripe!" exclaimed the long-legged nomad. "I feels like I wuz somebody else."

"And you look as if you were," assured the younger cowboy.

"Ther wu't thing erbout me," observed Rube, "is ther crooks in my legs. Them w'u'd be er dead guv-er-way."

"They will not be noticed in the darkness."

"Waal, I'll hev ter take mer chances."

"And now, Hans," said Chris, turning to the Dutch lad, "I want ycu to guard these fellows closely. If they try to get away, shoot them! Do you understand?"

"You pets my poots!"

"Then everything is ready to return to the pocket. Keep your ears open for the signal, Hans, for we may have to get into this cave in a hurry, in order to save our necks."

"Dot vas all righd. Hans Krummacher knows his peesness, und don'd you vorgid him! He vas going to keeb his ears vide oben tight, und all der dimes he vas vatchin' dose beoples v'at he haf in sharge. If they so much as vinks cross-essays, he vill shoold uf them der packins out. Yaw, dot vas so."

Then the torch was extinguished, and the three daring men descended the swaying rope-ladder.

When the bottom was reached they made a discovery.

Addle-pate Abe was not there!

CHAPTER XVI.

HANS IN TROUBLE.

IN vain they looked for the deranged man; he had vanished and was not to be found.

"Howlin' blizzards!" muttered Old Blossom.

"Mister Craziness has tooken er skip."

"Shore as shootin'," agreed Rube.

"Where can he have gone?" asked Chris.

"Ax us suthin' easier."

"W'at be we goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"I don't know as we need to worry. He has been here before, and you know he said they never harmed him."

"Ef he don't guv us erway—"

"I do not think he will."

"Waal, then, we'll let him go. But, w'at shell we do next?"

"I am going into the camp," declared Chris.

"As for you fellows, you had better hang around the Brandon headquarters and see if you can find out anything more about their plans."

A few moments later they parted, Chris turning toward the strange camp of the barred pocket.

The younger cowboy moved forward cautiously, his eyes wide open and his ears ready to catch every sound. He knew what it might cost him should he fall into the hands of any of the men of Lost Placer.

Chris had determined to warn Norman Strange in some manner, but just how he was going to do it puzzled him. He did not know Strange by sight, and he feared it would be no easy task to find the man.

"It shall be done some way," he gritted.

Through the darkness he crept till the first cabin was reached. There he halted, crouching close to the wall. From within the cabin came a low murmur of voices, but no light glimmered at the window.

For some reason the muttering voices aroused the cowboy's curiosity, and he searched about till he found a chink in the wall. To that opening he placed his ear, and, crouching on his knees, he listened.

"We're goin' ter work it ter-night," were the first words he heard. "It's too derned bad you are laid up so ye can't take er han', Jack?"

"Now ye're shoutin'!" growled another voice. "Blast this fut! Ef I hedn't drapped that rock on it, I'd bin with ye."

"Shore. You don't love Basil Brandon an' his men no more then w'at I do."

"Not er thunderin' bit!"

"Brandon'll be druv out of hyer ter-night."

"W'at be ther boss's plans?"

"I dunno yit, but he has 'em all laid out. While Brandon wuz erway, ther boss hes run in er dozen good men an' tough fighters."

"I hope thar won't be any miss-go."

"You needn't worry 'bout thet. Norman Strange hain't ther man ter make er miss arter plannin' anythin' out in this yar way. 'Sides thet, ther Brandons are gittin' drunk as fools. They hev bin singin' an' howlin'—"

"I heerd 'em."

"Thet's jest w'at ther boss wants 'em ter do. Ef they are full of fire-water, we'll down 'em an' not hafe try."

"Thet's so. Be our men drinkin' any?"

"Jest ernough ter brace 'em up. Ther boss hain't 'lowin' 'em only so much."

"He's level-headed."

"Now you're howlin'! But I mus' be gittin' out. Sorry fer ye, Jack."

Chris waited to hear no more, for he knew he would be in danger of discovery if he did so. Like a cat he crept from the cabin and crouched beside the wall of another. None too soon, for one of the men came out and passed over the very spot where he had been listening at the chink.

"Well," thought Chris, when the man had disappeared, "the climax is surely at hand. The Strangers are plotting to make a stroke against the Brandons at about the time the Brandons mean to descend on the Strangers. There is going to be a hot little war in this pocket before morning, and that is sure. It will mean disaster and ruin for one or both parties."

Near the center of the town stood the Neutral Ground Saloon, and toward this the young cowboy made his way. He longed for a chance to speak with Norman Strange, and trusted to Providence to aid him.

He was able to approach the saloon in such a manner that he could peer in at a window. Before he reached a position that enabled him to secure a view of the interior he heard a loud voice that seemed familiar. It came from within the building, and the speaker seemed angry or excited. When he reached the point where he could look through the open window he was surprised to discover the loud-voiced speaker was Addle-pate Abe.

The deformed maniac was walking up and down in front of the bar, swinging his arms and beating his hands together, while he cried:

"Woe, woe, woe to this wicked camp! It is doomed, doomed! Before another sunrise blood will be spilled and red flames shall leap to heaven! A curse is on the Lost Placer and all who try to secure wealth from it! Ha, ha, ha! Blood and fire! fire and blood! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wild as a hawk again!" thought Chris. "I hope he will not betray us! If he does—"

He did not finish the sentence, for once more Addle-pate Abe began raving:

"Who says the Red Fox is dead? They lie, lie! Who says I killed him? It is not true! He still lives—he will be here in this pocket to-night! Fly, fly, fly while there is yet time! This place is doomed and all who remain in it till the midnight hour! Then, between the death of one day and the birth of another—then the Red Fox shall die! This is his last night of life! His minutes are numbered!"

There were a dozen or more men within the saloon, but not one ventured to lay a hand on the wild man. They stood aloof and gazed on him awe, but it was plain to Chris they paid little heed to his words.

"They do not believe him," thought the cowboy. "So much the better."

Suddenly there was a commotion in the street. It came nearer till it reached the front of the saloon. Chris could not make out what it meant. In at the front door rushed several men, one of whom shouted:

"A spy! a spy! we have caught a spy!"

Then came two more men, dragging a third person between them.

The unfortunate individual was the fat Dutch boy, Hans!

CHAPTER XVII.

BEFORE NORMAN STRANGE.

COWBOY CHRIS was filled with amazement and dismay, for he had thought Hans safe in the cave. What had happened? Had the cave been discovered by the men of the pocket? or had Hans foolishly ventured from it? Chris

asked himself a score of questions in as many seconds, but was unable to answer any of them.

As they dragged Hans into the saloon, the frightened fellow begged for his life.

"Vor cootness sakes don'd kill me, sbentlemen!" he cried. "I haf nottings done ad all! V'at vor you shumps on me in dot kindt uf a manner? Id vas all some dretful mistakes! I vas nod der veller you vas looking vor, I pelieve!"

But the wild cries of his captors drowned his words.

"Shoot ther spy!"

"Lynch him!"

"Down with him!"

"Up with him!"

The cries were appalling.

Chris drew a revolver and waited, his eyes watching every move.

"It is not best they try to shoot him?" he gritted. "I will drop the whelp who makes a move to do so!"

At length one of the men silenced the others in a measure and turned to Hans.

"Look here, Fatty," he said, sternly. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"I vas nopody but Hans Krummacher," was the reply.

"Where are you from?"

"Rotterdam, Holland."

"That's not what I mean! Where are you from last?"

"Now, you vas kindt uf look ad here, Mister Inderquisitiveness, v'at vor you wants to mage dose ingwiries indo mine pessnesses vor, I pelieve? I don'd ask you v'ere you vas from und v'at vas der madder mit your mout. Dot don'd vas nottings to me. I always haf some delicacy apoud peing too forwart in such madders as dose."

"Look here, you Dutch fool!" growled the man, his hand falling heavily on Hans's shoulder. "The best thing you can do is answer my questions. You are in a mighty tight place anyway, and it will pay you not to get funny. Now how did you come here?"

"Vell, you know more apoud dot as v'at I do."

"What do you mean?"

"You vas von uf dose beoples v'at drags me here, I pelieve."

"That is not what I mean at all! How came you here in this pocket?"

It happened that the speaker thrust his right hand into the side pocket of his coat as he uttered the question. Hans promptly shook his head, declaring:

"Uf I vas in dot bocket, I don'd know nottings ad all apoud id. Dot bocket vas a very schmall sizes, und so I don'd po surprised I vas in some tight blaces uf I vas there. Yaw, dot vas so."

Out came the hand from the man's pocket, and it held a revolver. The weapon was promptly thrust under the Dutch lad's nose.

"You thick-headed idiot!" cried the owner of the weapon, his face black with passion. "See if this will bring you to your senses! If you don't answer my questions, I will blow the whole top of your fool head off!"

The Dutch boy's hair fairly stood on end.

"Oh, gid away off mit dose bistols!" he squawked, trying to break from his captors. "I don'd like der looks uf him! Ockseuse me uf I don'd see some fun in dot kindt uf a shokes!"

"You will find it a mighty serious joke. Now tell us how you came here."

"Vell, I don'd foot him all der vay. V'en I don'd ride, I vas walkin'; und v'en I don'd vas valkin', I vas ridin' or layin' schtill der schmall uf mein pack on."

"You did not come alone."

"Nixey."

"How many were with you?"

"Vorty-dree beoples, men, vimmin und shildren."

"Where are they now?"

"Dot is apoudt v'at I shoul't like to find out. I vas lost meinselufs und vas nod able to find v'ere I vas. Yaw, dot vas so."

"You became separated from the others?"

"Nixey; der odders pecame sebarated vrom me."

"Well, how came you in this pocket—right here where you are now?"

"Vell, dot vas v'at buzzles me. I s'bose I must haf vailed in here."

"You don't mean to say you fell in?"

"I pelief dot vas apoud der sizes uf him," was Hans's unblushing answer.

"Why, you infernal fool! Do you think you can make us believe such a story? It would have killed you!"

"Vell, id did come tretful nigh dot. I vas all proke up in peesness."

At this the crowd began to cry once more:

"Shoot him!"

"Lynch him!"

"To the nearest tree!"

The unlucky Dutch lad was seized and hustled in anything but a gentle manner, and Chris feared he would be shot or struck with one of the knives which flashed in many a hand.

"Helb!" cried Hans, in terror. "Ach, him-mell! I vas kilt gombletely! Helb, helb!"

That appeal was enough. Chris Comstock could not resist it. With a revolver in either hand, he leaped in at the open window.

"Hands off that boy!" he cried in ringing tones, as he advanced straight upon the mob. "Hands off, I say, or I will fit several of you for wooden overcoats!"

The crowd was filled with the greatest amazement by the appearance of another stranger in Lost Placer.

"Thunder an' guns!" shouted one. "Hyer's ernother cuss w'at don't b'long hyer!"

More than half the mob turned on Chris, but they found themselves looking into the muzzles of his revolvers.

"That boy is a friend of mine," he declared. "Harm him and I will make dog-meat of a few in that crowd!"

"Hefty talk!"

The one who had been questioning Hans stepped to the front.

"Who are you?" he demanded; "and how in blazes did you get into Lost Placer?"

"What if I refuse to answer?"

"You will have to answer."

"I am not so sure of that. But there is one man to whom I will give an account of myself."

"Who?"

"Norman Strange. Take me to him, and I will explain why I am here and how I came here."

"Derned ef we don't do it!"

"Let this boy come along too."

"All right; but you must give up your weapons."

"I will not. You are asking too much. If all this crowd is not enough to guard one man, even though he is armed, it is singular."

A consultation was held, and it was decided to escort the daring young cowboy and the Dutch lad before the man they wished to see, even though Chris refused to give up his arms. This the spokesman of the party made known to the cattleman, who promptly said:

"All right. Lead on; we will follow."

"Yaw, dot vas so," nodded Hans, delighted at the turn affairs had taken. "Don'd you vellers go to come some foolishness mit dot Christopher. He vas some very pad man to tackles, und don'd you vorgid him!"

Some of the crowd led the way, and Chris and Hans fell in behind. Then still others of the citizens belonging in the strange camp followed them, making it impossible for them to break away. Chris kept his revolvers in his hands.

"What in the world does this mean, Hans?" he cautiously asked, when they were in the street. "How did you happen to fall into the hands of those fellows? Speak low, so they will not understand."

Then the Dutch lad explained that one of the two men whom he was guarding had not been tied securely and had freed himself in the darkness. Then he struck the boy a blow that rendered him unconscious for a time, and when Hans recovered both were gone. He had immediately descended the rope ladder to inform his friends of the occurrence, and had walked straight into the hands of the men of Lost Placer Camp.

Chris was filled with consternation when he heard this.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "If those fellows returned to Brandon's party and told their story the dickens is to pay! The sooner I see Norman Strange the better!"

Two minutes later he was in the presence of the man he wished to see.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DARING OLD BLOSSOM.

"WAAL, pard," said Round-up Rube, turning to Old Blossom, w'at shell we do now?"

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" chuckled the strange old nomad. "You tell."

"We're disguised as outlaws, but derned ef I see as ther disguises are goin' ter do us much good."

"Thet's w'at I'm thinkin'."

"Now mine hain't any good, 'cause my legs are so 'tarnal crooked," growled the old cattleman; "but I'm hanged ef you don't look jest like ther tallest one o' them two critters as we left trussed up back thar."

"You hain't foolin'?"

"No."

"Then I'm goin' ter put this disguise ter use, by gum!"

"How?"

"I'm goin' inter ther nest o' ther Brandons."

"You don't mean it?"

"Waal, I jest do. I reckon leetle Bess is thar somewhar, an' now her dad is dead I mus' be er dad fer her. I'm goin' thar ter see ef I kin find her."

"But ef you're foun' out—"

"I'll hev ter take my chances. Ef I'm foun' out, I'll fight like blazes, an' I'm quite er boy in er scrap, ef I do say so."

"I'm 'feared ye won't come back ef ye go."

"Waal, I 'low it's my juty, so I'm goin'."

"Now?"

"Now."

Together the two men in disguise turned toward the cabin built against the cliff. Loud laughter and snatches of song occasionally came from the cabin, telling the men were still in a hilarious mood—or pretending to be. They advanced till quite near the cabin, then Old Blossom said:

"You'd best stop hyer, pard."

"Dern these yere legs o' mine!" snorted Rube. "But fer them— Say, ef I hears a rucshun I'll know w'at's up, an' you bet yer socks I'll come!"

They clasped hands and parted, Old Blossom advancing straight toward the cabin, the door of which was standing wide open. Through the open doorway he could see several men sitting around tables, playing cards, shouting, singing and apparently drinking. None of them wore masks, but before he reached the door a masked man came round one corner of the building and entered. The daring old fellow kept his eyes on this individual and saw him pass directly through the room and disappear beyond a door.

"Hyer goes ter foller," gritted Old Blossom.

Straight in at the doorway he marched, acting as if he belonged there. He scarcely glanced to the right or left, but advanced straight toward the door which had closed behind the other man in mask.

"Hello, Hi," called one of the card-players.

"Whar's Ike?"

"Outside thar," replied Old Blossom, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and not even pausing to glance around.

Still he was careful not to make undue haste, and he passed safely through the first room without being suspected.

When he entered the next room he was pleased to discover it was not nearly as well lighted as the first. This was in his favor.

There were a dozen men in the room, and nearly all wore masks, one or two being without such concealment for their faces. One of these the daring old fellow imagined was Basil Brandon, a man whose face was nearly covered to the eyes with a heavy black beard, and who attracted particular attention when he spoke. Neither White Plume nor Iron Ben were in the room. Old Blossom was delighted when he found his entrance attracted scarcely a bit of attention.

"So fur so good," he thought. "Now ef I kin only git inter ther cave I may be able ter find Bessie."

He immediately looked around for the entrance to the cave, and he soon decided it was beyond some blankets which hung against the wall. But he was not sure of this, and it would not do to make a mistake, so he gradually worked his way toward the blankets. When he had reached them, he turned his back to them and felt along cautiously with his hands. In this way he was not long in discovering where the opening to the cavern was.

But how was he to get beyond the blankets without attracting attention? That was what puzzled him. He appeared listening to the Babel of talk around him, but in truth he was trying to devise some scheme for getting into the cave.

At length, despairing of anything better, he resolved on a bold stroke. He would lift the curtain and enter the cavern.

But, what if he had not found the right place? Would not his movements attract attention? The fear of this did not deter him. With a deliberate movement, he lifted the heavy blankets and passed beyond, letting them fall behind him.

This accomplished, he halted and listened to see if his move had attracted notice, and, to his

intense delight, not a sound or a word gave indication he had been observed.

"Ham fat an' sizzled sassage!" he mentally exclaimed. "This yere's easy as slippin' off a log! Now ter nose erlong. Hevin' made er go so fur, I'm boun' ter git thar, Eli, ur bu'st."

He felt around, moving cautiously, till his hand touched a cold, dank surface of rock. Then, with his fingers against the side of the passage, he cautiously advanced.

For some time Old Blossom went forward in this manner, but he finally paused and drew a metallic match-safe from his pocket.

"Boun' ter hev light on ther subjec'," he muttered.

A match was extracted and struck. Old Blossom gazed around by aid of the light thus afforded, and a cry of surprise and delight came faintly from his covered lips, for on a rocky shelf near at hand he saw three lanterns.

"Looks like they wuz placed thar a puppose!" he chuckled.

He lost little time in lighting one of them, and then he went forward again. He had proceeded a long distance when he was suddenly startled by hearing the harsh command:

"Halt, thar!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LOST ONE FOUND.

OLD BLOSSOM instantly obeyed.

"W'at in blazes do you want in hyer, Hi Sawyer?" demanded the voice. "Are you drunk again?"

That question gave Old Blossom his cue. He remembered the voice and manner of the man called Hi, and he resolved to imitate the fellow, appearing intoxicated.

"Drunksh!" he gurgled, seeming slightly unsteady on his legs. "Naw, I hain't drunksh!"

"Well, I'm blowed ef you hain't!" cried the unseen man. "And you to take part in the scrimmage to-night! By gracious, Hi! it will go hard with you when the captain finds out you have disobeyed his orders in this way."

Old Blossom began to whimper.

"Don't want ther cap'n ter find thish out! Shay, you won't tell him, will yer? Tha'sh wha' I kem in hyer fer—sho he w'u'dn't find it out. Ef you won't tell him I'sh goin' ter guv you drinksb."

"Have you got any more of the stuff left?" and the unseen man was heard approaching. "I am a little dry, that's a fact."

Old Blossom staggered forward, holding the lantern in such a manner that the light revealed scarcely anything but his long legs.

"You bet I hash got shum!" he gurgled, thickly. "Got er whole pintsh left! He-yoop!"

"Well, now you *are* drunk!" cried the man, as he appeared within the circle of light. "Here you are all togged out for the tussle that is to take place, and you are in this beastly condition! I don't wonder the captain says you are the most unreliable man he has got! I have a mind to punch your head, Hi Sawyer!"

Up came Old Blossom's fists, the lantern being dropped, but fortunately landing in an upright position.

"Punch my headsh, hey?" he cried, lunging forward. "Wal, now, you jesth try tha'trick!"

The man attempted to seize Old Blossom by the collar, but felt himself suddenly grasped by the throat with hands that seemed made of steel, while a strange voice hissed in his ears:

"Keep still, critter! Ef ye squarm an' try ter squeal, I'll guv ye yer everlastin' dost o' sickness! Ef you keer fer life, be easy!"

The man was taken by surprise, and the disguised Blossom easily threw him to the floor. Then, sitting astride the fallen fellow's body, the old Death Hunter flashed a knife before his eyes, hissing:

"Business straight, ole hoss! I reckon you be clean knocked out by this yere turn o' things, an' I don't blame ye er derned bit. It must hev bin er powerful big s'prise party. I 'low you hev got common hoss sense ernough ter know better'n ter yoop now."

"What—want?" asked the man, speaking with difficulty, as the old man's hand still pressed heavily on his throat. "Who—you?"

"Oh-oi!" chuckled the daring old fellow.

"W'at do I want, an' who be I? Ye're inquisitive, I see. Waal, I don't blame ye. But you'll hev ter keep speecylatin' on them thar questions, fer I hain't got no time ter explain in detail—can't bother ter guv ye my hull blamed pedigree, fer it runs clean back ter ther Ark, whar they hed ham, lamb an' hay-fever. Howsum-dever, I will susplain w'at I want. Fu'st, I

want you ter turn over on yer face. Don't squawk! Jest turn kinder gentle like. I hain't goin' ter hurt ye none ef you mind well, but I'll cut ye bad ef ye acts contrary—yes, indeed, I will! Turn over, as ther feller said w'en he passed his plate fer another."

The gleaming knife and the turn affairs had taken filled the man with dismay, and he uncomplainingly obeyed.

"Now putt yer han's ahind ye," ordered Blossom.

The fellow did so.

Quickly extracting some cords from his pockets, Old Pike made his captive's hands secure. Then he made a gag of the handle of a knife, forcing the unlucky man to take it into his mouth, securing it there with cords.

"Thar, thar!" snickered the strange old fellow, surveying his work. "Thet'll keep ye kind o' quiet fer a while—yes, it will! Now I'll help ye ter yer feet, pard."

He aided the man to arise, then added:

"Now, I want you ter take me straight ter ther leetle gal!"

The man looked at him blankly, shaking his head.

"You don't mean it?"

The captive nodded.

Again the old man's knife was flashed before the captive's eyes.

"See thet, pard? Waal, I'll cut yer woozle with it ef ye don't lead me thar! I hain't foolin'. I'm hyer ter find ther gal, an' I'm goin' ter find her anyhow. Ef you help me, it'll be all ther better fer you. Lead on, or take ther knife!"

The man hesitated a moment, then, in a despairing manner, he led the way.

Blossom lifted the lantern and followed.

In a few moments they turned from the passage into another, and there the daring old avenger found a lighted lantern swinging overhead. This he took down, muttering:

"We may as well hev plenty o' light on ther subject."

Onward they went for a long distance. At length they came to a door set in the stone wall. Toward this the man nodded.

"Is she in thar?" asked Old Blossom.

The captive bowed.

"Waal, we'll mighty soon find out," said the old man, perceiving the door was barred and not locked.

He quickly removed the bars and pulled the door open. Then he found himself looking into a lighted chamber, and at one side, reclining on a rude couch was a sleeping girl.

Little Bess was found!

In his excitement, Old Blossom did not forget his captive, and the fellow was marched into the chamber where the old man could keep an eye on him.

Then the vagabond of the mountains and plains softly approached the cot, removing the mask from his face. Bending over the sleeping girl, whose face looked haggard and tear-stained, he lifted her in his arms. As he did so, she awoke and uttered a slight scream.

"Bessie, puss!"

She stared at him wildly, as if unable to believe she was not dreaming.

Then she whispered:

"Dan—Uncle Dan, is it really you?"

"It's me, leetle one—it's yer old Uncle Dan, shore!"

Then her arms went round his neck, and in a moment she was sobbing, choking and laughing on his breast, while she clung to him with all her strength.

"Oh, Uncle Dan! Uncle Dan!" she gasped. "Is it really true? It must be a dream! I thought I'd never see you any more! Oh! is it true—can it be?"

"It is really true, Bessie! I am hyer—I hev foun' ye! Oh, my pore leetle gal! They sha'n't take ye frum yer old uncle! He'll lay down his life fer ye!"

What an affecting meeting that was! It is impossible and needless to record all that passed, but in a short time the girl was calm enough to tell him all that had occurred, from the time she was snatched from her bed far away in Glory Gulch till he found her in her cavern prison.

Her story was a touching one, and it filled Old Blossom with rage.

"Them devils shell pay dearly fer all they hev made ye suffer, leetle one!" he declared. "An' ther Red Fox taunted ye with hev'n' killed yer father! Waal, we hev run him ter his hoel, an' ter-night he dies! Chris an' Ole Rube are hyer, an' they will fight ter ther last gasp fer ye. Hans hes also kem erlong."

"Hans!" she cried. "Good, faithful Hans!"

At heart he is a coward, but he would lay down his life for me! He is tried and true!"

"You shell see him afore menny hours pass, leetle one."

"But, Uncle Dan, what of Conrad?"

The old man shook his head.

"I dunno, Bessie. All I know is thet, like ther rest o' us, he follered ther Red Fox ter Devil's Diggin's."

"Yes, yes! I knew he was there! I heard his voice when that wretch was carrying me from the hotel! I tried to scream, but they nearly smothered me with the blanket they held over my head."

"Waal, he disappeared at ther same time you wuz kerried off."

The old man did not tell her Conrad had been shot down and his fate still remained a mystery.

During the greater part of this time Old Dan had kept his eyes on the man he had captured, but now the fellow fancied he saw an opportunity to slip away. He tried to do so, but a revolver clicked in the Death Hunter's hands, and he sternly cried:

"Hole on thar! I hain't done with you, by er long shot! I want you ter show us ther way ter git out under ther waterfall. I don't fancy I'll go back inter thet hornets' nest—not by er dad-burned sight!"

Finding himself covered by Old Blossom's revolver, the man promptly halted.

"Thet's ther stuff!" chuckled the vagrant. "You know which side yer bread's buttered on, I reckon. Now, Bessie Puss, git redde ter leave this yere place."

In a few moments the girl was ready, and they were about to leave, when Old Blossom exclaimed:

"Hark! W'at's thet?"

They listened, and far away along the passage they heard loud cries and pistol-shots.

What did it mean?

"Ham fat an' sizzled sassage!" gasped Old Blossom. "W'at hes bruck loose now, I'd like ter know?"

The sounds came nearer and nearer, sounding plainer with each passing moment.

"Derned ef I don't b'lieve ther fat's all in ther fire!" gritted the old tramp. "Ther hull Brandon gang's comin', an' we're in fer it!"

CHAPTER XX.

A DESPERATE SITUATION.

TRIUMPH and delight were written on the face of the captive Brandon.

"Hanged ef you shell guv it erway ter 'em!" exclaimed Old Blossom, and in an instant he had tripped the fellow. By rare good fortune, the man's head struck against a stone and he was stunned for a time. When he recovered, he found his feet were secured, and he was helpless to walk, as well as talk. He could only remain in a reclining posture and mentally call down anything but blessings on the head of the old man who had tricked him.

Already had Old Blossom and Little Bess left the cavern chamber for the passage, and the unlucky fellow was alone. The old vagabond was swift to think, and he had devised a scheme of defense.

Almost at the door of the chamber he had noticed a mass of boulders. These he would use as a fort, and ensconced behind their shelter, he would attempt to hold the Brandons at bay for a time, at least.

It did not take them long to reach the shelter of the rocks. There he extinguished one of the lanterns. Leaving Bessie behind the boulders, he hurried down the passage a short distance and left the lighted lantern.

"Mebbe thet'll help us see 'em w'en they come, ef so be they hain't got no lights," he said, as he returned to the rocks, hearing the wild cries close at hand.

"Oh, uncle!" sobbed Little Bess. "You will surely be killed! and it is all on my account!"

"Don't let thet worry ye, leetle gal. Ther ole man's er powerful hard critter ter kill—now he jest is! It looks like he wuz cornered this yere time, but he's goin' ter fight jest as long as he kin gasp, by gum!"

The sounds were now close at hand, and Old Blossom turned to face along the passage, a revolver in each hand. As he did so, a hatless, panting man staggered into view, revealed by the light of the lantern.

It was Iron Ben! The horse-thief seemed running for his life, and it was plain he was hard pushed.

"Halt!" cried Old Blossom.

The man did not heed the command.

"Halt, or I fire!"

"Don't fire, for God's sake!" panted the fugitive.

Something restrained the old man, and a moment later Iron Ben sunk exhausted behind the rocks.

"W'at's this mean?" demanded Blossom.

"They're coming!" replied Iron Ben, wildly, his eyes resting on the face of the veteran. "They're comin', Blossom—the whole mess of them! Does the passage end here? If so, we are doomed!"

"Great hoppin' high-pan-todds!" shouted the old man. "Who be you thet knows me?"

Bessie shrieked:

"It is Conrad! I know his voice!"

"Yes, I am Conrad Vincent!" and the supposed horse-thief tore aside the false beard he had worn.

The next moment the lovers were clasped in each other's arms.

And just then Old Blossom was shouting to the pursuers, who had appeared down the passage, several bearing torches and lighted lanterns.

"Chain right up thar!" commanded the fearless old Death Hunter. "You've got more'n one man ter tackle hyer, and don't ye fergit thet! Halt, ur we'll open fire on ye!"

The pursuers, the greater part of whom were masked, stopped in astonishment and dismay.

"Bully fer you!" laughed the queer old border tramp. "Some o' you critters hev got er leetle dite o' sense in yer heads, I reckon."

"Who are you?" demanded one of the men, stepping to the front.

"I'm Ole Chain-lightnin' on trucks," was the prompt reply. "W'en I gits ter sizzlin' suthin's ap' ter be scorched. Thet's er fac', by gum!"

"How came you here?"

"Ho, me an' my pards kem in by ther way o' ther watter-fall."

"How many are there of you?"

"Jest even 'leven."

"Where are they all?"

"Say, you're too inquisitive! We be round hyer, bet yer ole socks! Ef ye don't think so, jest sail in an' see how full o' hoels ye kin git."

"The man is lying!" said a harsh voice, and another of the band stepped to the front.

Then the Brandons held a consultation. While this was going on Old Blossom resolved to know how Conrad Vincent came to be there, and he questioned the young man.

"I was not killed at the hotel in Devil's Diggin's, as you can see," said Conrad. "The bullet struck on a piece of metal I wear over my heart and was stopped, but the shock made me so sick and faint I could not stand, although I did not quite lose consciousness. I was crazed, I suppose, when I found the wretches had succeeded in carrying Bessie away, and my only thought was to follow. I did so in the darkness, and that explains my disappearance."

"It must seem strange that I am here playing the part of Iron Ben among these outlaws, for the Brandons are no more than Red Fox's band. I will not go into detail, for there is no time. Suffice to say I met Iron Ben, and the horse-lifter tried to kill me and get away with my horse; but he was worsted. In self-defense I mortally wounded him. As he was dying, he told me of Lost Placer Camp, and said he was on his way to join the Red Fox's gang, having in his pocket a paper from a fellow known as Spot-eye Smith which would make him solid with Basil Brandon. When he was dead, I buried him, securing the paper. Then the scheme to impersonate him entered my head. At the next camp I was fortunate enough to strike a defective and secure this disguise. I did not look much like Iron Ben, but I trusted that none of the Brandons had ever seen the famous horse-thief. I came on and, as I supposed was successful in deceiving them all, but I was wrong. There was one who suspected me, and when I entered the cabin with White Plume, a few minutes ago, he exposed me to the band. I could not get out by the front way, so I took to this cave. I would have been all right had I not turned into this passage in the darkness. By doing so I brought disaster upon us all."

"Waal," drawled Old Blossom, "I thought I hed lot's o' gall ter play ther part I did; but I sw'ar, you beat me young man!"

"It was all for Bessie!" came softly from Conrad's lips.

"Waal, thar's one thing I want ter ax: Is Basil Brandon an' ther Red Fox one an' ther same critter?"

Before Conrad could reply, one of the outlaws called:

"Hello, there!"

"Hello, yerself, an' see how ye like it!" was Old Blossom's prompt response.

"You fellows had better surrender."

"Sho! you don't mean it!"

"If you do not, we will take you any way."

"Git out!"

"We are not fooling."

"Ner be we. We are purty well fortyfied ahind these er rocks, an' thar am enough o' uster lick ther hull measly gang o' you critters. Ef you think you kin straddle us, jest try it. We'll bore 'bout er dozen o' ye afore ye git hyer."

"That is all bluster."

"Then kem on an' try us!" retorted the old rough and ready, as if anxious for the fray. "Thar's nothin' like tryin', ye know. Wade in, sinners!"

But the outlaws did not seem any too anxious to wade.

"If you shoot one of us, it will be the worse for you," was their threat.

"Wal, we won't shoot one. Oh, no! We'll shoot erbout a clean dozen!"

At this moment ominous sounds came echoing faintly along the passage. First there was a cheer as of many voices, then a fusilade of fire-arms. After this were yells, shouts and shots, seeming as if a desperate and deadly encounter had been suddenly inaugurated.

For a few seconds the outlaws stood as if paralyzed with astonishment, then, at a cry from their leader, they wheeled and dashed back along the passage, leaving the three behind the rocks.

"Ham fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" shouted Old Dan. "Chris Comstock hes tole ther Strangers o' ther plot 'g'inst 'em, an' they hev 'tacted ther Brandons! Hooray! we're saved!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE END OF THE CRUSADE IS REACHED.

OLD BLOSSOM was right; Chris had told Norman Strange, and the Strangers had attacked the headquarters of the Brandons. The outlaws rushed out of the cave just in time to take a hand in the battle, but they were too late to save their comrades, who had been taken by surprise and overwhelmed.

Madly raged the battle, and in the very hottest of it the nodding feather of the Red Fox's lieutenant could be seen.

But, where was the Red Fox himself? Where was Basil Brandon?

He had disappeared, and the outlaw lieutenant seemed to be the leading man among the defenders.

Men fell to the right and left in the mad struggle, and the smoke of battle filled the cabin against the cliff. A torch was flung on a pile of rubbish in one corner, and in a few moments the building was afire. From the blazing interior the struggling men retreated to the outer air, and there they fought by the light of the devouring flames.

The moment White Plume issued from the door he heard a loud yell and saw a terrible-looking creature rushing upon him.

It was the madman, Addle-pate Abe!

The lieutenant threw up his right hand, which held a revolver, and fired. A cry of anguish broke from the lips of the maniac, but his rush was not checked. In another moment he had the bandit lieutenant in his crooked arms and was plying a wicked-looking knife!

The battle could have but one termination. The Brandons had intended to take their foes by surprise, but the tables were fairly turned, and defeat was theirs. Such as threw down their weapons and cried for quarter were spared, but a great many fought to the last gasp. In the end the victory of the Strangers was complete, only for one thing.

Basil Brandon had escaped and was not to be found! It was never known how he got out of the pocket.

When the battle was over, Chris, Rube and Hans came upon two men lying side by side. One was dead and the other dying. The one already dead was the maniac, poor Addle-pate Abe; the other, White Plume, who had met his fate at the madman's hands.

The dying man lifted his hand and motioned to Chris. As the young cowboy bent over him, he said, faintly:

"Remove this mask so I can breathe. I cannot get air enough. I am done for!"

Chris saw the fellow was bleeding profusely from many wounds. Without delay he removed the mask.

"Where is Conrad Vincent?" asked the

doomed man. "I wish to see him, for I am Pascal Boone!"

And then they saw he spoke the truth. Before them lay the man who had played the part of Black Bender in Devil's Diggings. Slippery Shane, the horse-thief, was soon to breathe his last.

"Has not Vincet come from the cave?" asked the dying man.

When they told him they knew not where Conrad Vincent was, he declared the young man was in the cave, the mouth of which was concealed by the burning cabin.

"Great Heaven!" cried Chris. "He will be stifled with smoke! He will not come out alive!"

"He will not be stifled," assured Boone. "The cave is too extensive for that, and there are too many fresh air currents which draw through it. He will come out alive. The girl is in there, too."

"What girl—Bessie?"

"Yes."

"An' I reckon Ole Blossom must be in thar," spoke Round-up Rube. "I hain't bin able ter find him sence ther battle ended. He went in, an' hain't seen him come out."

"Well," said Chris, regretfully, "we have failed in one thing."

"What's thet?"

"Basil Brandon is not to be found. They say he has escaped."

"An' so ther Red Fox is still at liberty!"

Boone's eyes had been closed, but he started at this and they flew open.

"The Red Fox will trouble you no more," he said.

"How's thet? W'at d'yer mean?"

"He is dead!"

"Dead?"

"Impossible!"

Something like a scornful smile passed over the doomed man's lips.

He has been dead more than a year!

This declaration filled the cowboys with amazement, but Rube turned to Chris, speaking softly:

"He is becomin' crazy."

"I am not," asserted the dying man, with firmness. "I speak the truth when I say the Red Fox has been dead more than a year. The creature who gave me my death wound was his destroyer, but deranged as he was, he did not remember it. He believed the Red Fox still lived."

"But ther critter hes bin at his foul tricks within ther year," protested the bow-legged cattleman.

"That was not the Red Fox. *It was I who did those things!*"

"You?"

"Yes; I personated the Red Fox, and to a certain extent I deceived the very men who were my followers. I had the eyes of the Red Fox, and he had always kept his face masked. Only one man ever looked upon it, and that man lies dead at my side. To all others he was a mystery. I, of all the band, was the only one who knew of his death. I had been his lieutenant, and I knew his ways. In his clothes I personated him. I also acted as lieutenant, and it may have puzzled many of the band why within the past year the chief and the lieutenant have never been seen together."

"But such a thing seems incredible—impossible!"

"Nevertheless, it is true. I found it to my advantage to play both parts. Before joining the band I was known as Slippery Shane. I tried to get clear of that title, but it clung to me. But for Norman Strange—curse him!—I would not be dying here."

"But who was Basil Brandon?"

"Simply a tool of mine. I know some of the men thought him the chief, but that is where they were fooled."

"And you killed Jim Pike?"

"I did."

"Then," said Chris, solemnly, "my oath shall be kept. I will see you lying dead at my feet."

"That is true, for I can last but a short time longer. I knew of the hatred my old chief bore for Jim Pike, and, hating Conrad Vincent, and wishing to gain possession of Pike's girl, I first poisoned the old man's mind against Vincent. I meant to remain and woo Miss Bessie in a regular manner, but circumstances prevented. I found I must return to Lost Placer at once, so I killed old Jim and kidnapped the girl."

"That was what worked your doom."

"So I see now. Oh, the infernal luck! It is enough to drive a man mad to think of it! Dying, dying! Conrad Vincent will live to triumph

over me, curse him! How I hate him, even though I know I always was in the wrong! Nature made him an honest man, just as she made me a villain."

Boone grew wilder as the minutes passed, and as he sunk lower, he began to rave in a manner that was terrible to hear. He was suffering such tortures as comes to most wicked men when they know they are dying. He kept calling for water, and Chris Comstock remained by his side, moistening his lips till the last delirious whisper had died out in the death-rattle that told the end had come.

Norman Strange and his men being triumphant, Lost Placer Camp was thrown open to the world. However, in less than a year the placer-diggings were exhausted, and the town died a natural death.

Pascal Boone and his destroyer were buried in one grave, and there they sleep side by side, awaiting the Great Day of Judgment.

The two men who escaped from Hans Krummacher were never again seen in those parts. What became of them is unknown.

Basil Brandon's life after leaving Lost Placer is unknown. He probably dropped that name forever.

Three months after the events just narrated a quiet wedding took place in Prescott, the groom being Conrad Vincent and the bride "Little Bess."

Old Dan Pike gave the bride—his little "puss"—away, and Chris Comstock was "best man, with one exception."

Round-up Rube was there, of course, and if ever two men looked queer they were Rube and Old Blossom in "b'iled" shirts and standing collars!

Hans Krummacher was there, too, and he managed to thrust a small cactus burr down Dan Pike's back just before the ceremony commenced. As a result, the veteran was in torture for the next twenty minutes, and the contortions of his face—which he vainly endeavored to keep straight—were ludicrous in the extreme. Hans was obliged to stuff his handkerchief into his mouth to keep from shouting with laughter, and then his face got so red that there seemed great danger of his bursting a blood-vessel.

When "the agony was over," Hans innocently inquired:

"V'at vas der madder mit your gountenance, Mister Bike? Id seems like somedings mit you der drouble vas, ain'd id? Berhaps you don'd haf some toot'aches, ur a coals of fire down der spine, eh, ur somedings uf dot sort?"

"Old Blossom shook his fist at the Dutch lad, replying:

"Sizzlin' sassage! You see if I don't fix you fer thet, you son of a bologna!"

"Dot vas all righd," assured Hans. "Dot shoost apoud mages us efen. Berhaps you don'd laugh so hardt der next dimes v'en I gid some rethod coals der pack uf me down. Yaw, I guess dot vas so."

THE END.

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